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இலங்கை மனித உரிமைகள் ஆணைக்குழு  
Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka

Press Notice No: HRC/P/i/E/03/09/25

## Press Notice

### **Report on the Ongoing Investigation into the Mass Grave Site in Chemmani, Jaffna**

The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) conducted a fact-finding mission on the ongoing investigation into the mass grave site in Chemmani, Jaffna on 3 and 4 August 2025. The purpose of the mission was to observe the current investigation process, to engage relevant institutional actors, independent observers, and representatives of family members of disappeared persons, and to identify challenges encountered by institutional actors and family members of disappeared persons.

On 3 August 2025, the HRCSL met with the staff of the Office on Missing Persons (OMP) and certain attorneys-at-law and civil society actors representing family members of disappeared persons. On 4 August, the HRCSL visited the mass grave site to observe the excavation and exhumation work. At the site, it met with the Learned Jaffna Magistrate Mr. Amalavalan Anandarajah, the Judicial Medical Officer (JMO) Dr. Selliah Pranavan, and the officer in charge of the preliminary investigation conducted by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). It also visited the Department of Forensic Medicine at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Jaffna and met with JMO Dr. Pranavan and the Head of Department Dr. P.A. Dinesh Coonghe. It then observed the way the recovered human remains are being stored at the Department. The HRCSL also separately met with Prof. Raj Somadeva, the archaeological expert assigned to supervise the excavation and exhumation at the mass grave site in Chemmani.

On 3 September 2025, the HRCSL published its report detailing the main findings, observations, and recommendations of the HRCSL emerging from its visit and subsequent developments surrounding the exhumations and excavations at the mass grave site in Chemmani. At the time of publishing the report, the investigation into the mass grave site was ongoing and had led to the discovery of over 200 human remains. The findings and observations in the HRCSL's report are organised under specific themes: (1) the functions and initial findings of the various institutional actors; (2) the adequacy of expertise and technology; (3) the adequacy and accessibility of funding; (4) accountability and the role of security forces and law enforcement authorities; and (5) the role of the Bar, civil society, and the media.

Based on the preliminary feedback of the experts working at the site, the HRCSL learnt that over 90 percent of the human remains found at the site had no form of clothing whatsoever. It was also

observed that, given the positioning of the skeletal remains, including the fact that some remains were in extreme proximity to one another, and the shallow depth of the remains, there is a reasonable likelihood that the burials were unlawful and pursuant to extrajudicial killings.

The report noted major gaps in expertise and technology available for the investigation into the mass grave site in Chemmani. These gaps related to the lack of an adequate number of experts in forensic anthropology and forensic archaeology, the non-availability of technological facilities for more accurate methods of carbon dating, such as bomb-pulse <sup>14</sup>C carbon dating, and the lack of cost-effective and accessible technological facilities to analyse DNA. In this context, the HRCSL found that overseas expertise and technology would be required to effectively complete the investigation. It also found that there were notable weaknesses in the timely provision of adequate funds for the investigation into the mass grave site in Chemmani.

The report highlighted disturbing accounts of certain officers of the CID intimidating persons involved in the excavation and exhumation work at the mass grave site. In such circumstances, the report concluded that the continued involvement of regular police officers in the investigation into the mass grave site in Chemmani was likely to prejudice the outcome of the investigation. It recommended that an alternative approach would be needed and highlighted the need for the establishment of an independent permanent Office for the Investigation and Prosecution of Serious Crimes by State Officials. The report also recounted details from the HRCSL's ongoing investigation into a complaint made by journalist Kumanan Kanapathippillai. It was noted that the timing and circumstances of the summoning of the journalist by the Counter Terrorism and Investigation Division (CTID) gave rise to serious concerns, as he was, at the time of his summoning, in the process of documenting and reporting on the progress of the investigation into the mass grave site in Chemmani. The report concludes that such acts by law enforcement authorities were likely to have a chilling effect on media freedom.

Therefore, the main finding of the HRCSL's report was that, while specific institutional actors appear to be discharging their duties with commitment and care, there remains a gap in capacity and will among law enforcement authorities to ensure accountability for the deaths of the persons found at the site.

The HRCSL presented the following recommendations to the relevant state authorities:

**To the Hon. Minister of Justice:**

- 1. Initiate a process through which a Standard Operating Procedure for conducting investigations into mass grave sites can be developed in close consultation with all relevant experts, including attorneys-at-law and civil society representatives, and formally adopted. The SOP should also contain the responsibility to issue regular official updates to keep stakeholders informed of the progress of the investigation.**
- 2. Appoint a focal point at the Ministry of Justice to expeditiously process budget requests, allocations, and disbursements, and to work closely with the OMP and all state officials involved in the investigation into the mass grave site in Chemmani to ensure timely access to resources.**

3. Take immediate steps to provide resources for the use of GPR equipment from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura to scan a wider area in the mass grave site as well as the surrounding area to comprehensively assess whether further human remains exist in the area.
4. Take steps to prioritise the completion of the investigation in Chemmani when securing and allocating key human resources such as archaeological research teams. Develop a pool of available archaeological experts to support excavations and exhumations at multiple mass grave sites.
5. Seek and secure relevant expertise and technological facilities, including from overseas, for the purpose of credibly and independently analysing DNA samples gathered from the human remains found at the mass grave site in Chemmani.
6. Take steps to establish a 'DNA bank' in which DNA samples of family members of disappeared persons can be voluntarily obtained and securely stored for future comparison purposes.
7. Seek and secure relevant expertise and technological facilities from overseas for the purpose of credibly and independently dating the human remains found at the mass grave site in Chemmani, and specifically securing the use of the bomb-pulse  $^{14}\text{C}$  carbon dating method.
8. Take steps to implement the above-mentioned recommendations with respect to all other investigations into mass grave sites in Sri Lanka.
9. Ensure that all necessary support with respect to the present investigation into the mass grave site in Chemmani is provided to the successor of the present Learned Magistrate in the event of his promotion.
10. Take steps to establish a permanent independent 'Office for the Investigation and Prosecution of Serious Crimes by State Officials' with broad powers to investigate *inter alia* enforced disappearance and extra-judicial killings allegedly committed by members of security forces or law enforcement authorities, and to prosecute perpetrators.

**To the Inspector General of Police:**

11. Issue directions to the CID to refrain from intimidating any state functionaries or family members of disappeared persons, including pursuing irrelevant and antagonistic lines of questioning during the course of any ongoing investigation.
12. Issue directions to the CTID to:
  - a. Strictly conform to the IGP's Circular RTM 101/CRTM 61 dated 2 July 2025 when conducting investigations (i.e., to clearly inform a person of the reason for which they are summoned to give a statement); and

- b. Refrain from misusing investigative powers to summon media personnel who are covering the investigation into the mass grave site in Chemmani, except in clear instances where there is a reasonable suspicion of a specific offence.**

**To the Hon. Minister of Defence, and the Commander of Sri Lanka Army:**

- 13. Issue clear orders to officers of Sri Lanka Army to refrain from any involvement in the ongoing investigations into the mass grave site in Chemmani, including contacting any state official, civil society representative, or family member of a disappeared person.**

**To the Hon. Minister of Higher Education:**

- 14. Take steps to review the current training requirements pertaining to medical students gaining a speciality in forensic anthropology, and consider limiting the number of years required for foreign training in this subject to one year inclusive of state funding for the entire year.**
- 15. Formulate a plan to incentivise and develop local expertise in forensic archaeology through the university system.**

**To the Hon. Minister of Finance:**

- 16. Consider directing the Inland Revenue Department to issue a VAT exemption notice to Sri Lanka Customs to enable the release of vital laboratory equipment donated to the University of Jaffna for the purpose of establishing a Clinical Genetics Unit.**

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