

Report

**Committee of Experts for the establishment of a
monument to commemorate those who died
as a result of the armed conflict, political unrest or
civil disturbances in Sri Lanka during the period
1983-2009**

May 31, 2024

Composition of the Committee

1. **Prof. Emeritus Jagath Weerasinghe** Chairman
2. **Prof. Chandragupta Thenuwara**
Professor of History and Art Theory, University of Visual and
Performing Arts Member
3. **Prof. Farzana F Haniffa**
Professor of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo Member
4. **Prof. T Sanathanan**
Head, Department of Fine Arts, University of Jaffna Member
5. **Ms S A T S Suriyaarachchi**
Acting Director General, Office of National Unity &
Reconciliation Member
6. **Mr Mahinda Withanaarachchi**
Additional Director General, Urban Development Authority Member

Report of the committee of experts for the establishment of a monument to commemorate those who died as a result of the armed conflict, political unrest, and civil disturbances in Sri Lanka during the period 1983 -2009

A committee of experts - Prof. Jagath Weerasinghe (chair), Prof. Chandraguptha Thenuwara, Prof. T. Sanathanan, Prof. Farzana F. Haniffa, Mr. Deepthi Lamahewa, Director General, ONUR - later Ms. Thushari Suriyaarachchi, Acting Director General ONUR, and Mr. Mahinda Withanaarachchi, Additional Director General, UDA were appointed for the above in August 2023. The committee was tasked with the following:

1. To plan, design and coordinate the construction of a monument to be erected at an appropriate location in Colombo as a symbol of healing and reconciliation to commemorate all the persons including civilians, members of armed forces, the police and ex-combatants who died as a result of armed conflict, political unrest or civil disturbances in Sri Lanka during the period 1983-2009.
2. Such a monument is to be planned and designed in a manner to elicit ownership and support of aggrieved persons, foster collective commitment for non-recurrence of the conflicts and promote the achievement of communal healing and reconciliation among all Sri Lankans.

We appreciate the president's interest in taking forward reconciliation in the country through a proposal to establish a national monument. Erecting a monument as a symbol of healing and reconciliation to commemorate all persons including civilians, members of armed forces and the police, and ex-combatants who died as a result of armed conflict, was recognized as important by the committee given that it is now a decade and a half since the war's end. The committee saw such a project as indicating a government commitment to recovery from a difficult past as well as an aspiration to build a future where diversity and coexistence are treasured.

Our methodology for the above process foregrounded the following words contained in the brief from the president's office: "elicit ownership and support of aggrieved persons". We consulted affected communities and members of civil society in the North and East and in Kurunegala district and also met with experts in the field of reconciliation and memorialization. All ethnic groups were represented at our consultations but most likely all opinions were not fully addressed. The following report is a summary of our findings and recommendations.

It became clear from the consultations that the war continued to be very present in conflict affected areas and among the families of the soldiers. The scars were permanent. There was distrust and fear of the government among most communities in the north and east, particularly given the prohibition against memorialization. The existence of a large and palpable power differential between the Sinhala south and Tamil communities in the north and east was evident and the people in the north seemed to feel that the south lacked an adequate appreciation of how the north

suffered during the war. The people in the north and east still spoke about the south in the oppositional terms cultivated during war time.

In Trincomalee and Kurunegala former military personnel refused to have soldiers memorialized with the LTTE whose actions, they said, would be legitimized by placing them on the same level as the military. In the north civilian groups refused to have their dead memorialized with the military whom they consider to be perpetrators of crimes against their loved ones. Experts we consulted also recommended that we ensure that the military labor is not utilized for the construction of any monument.

We also encountered the many differences between communities and were privy to the particularities of each district that we visited. Among Muslim communities expelled in 1990, there was a call for history writing as a memorialization initiative. When discussing the setting up of a memorial in Mullivaikal it was mentioned that locating the place of memorials was important as some locations would serve as memorials to lost LTTE cadres alone and others who were also lost would not be prioritized at such locations. In the east ethnic tensions from the war continue to remain salient and were called attention to in the Trincomalee and Batticaloa meetings.

Representatives of all communities felt left behind by the state to varying degrees. Representatives of the Tamil communities in the north and east felt that they had not been permitted to move on from the conflict; in addition to being prevented from memorializing, and the ongoing unresolved questions regarding the disappeared, they were also constantly subjected to surveillance and harassment by the military and police. Additionally, the land grabs, the building of Buddhist stupas and Buddha statues in places where there are no Buddhist communities, and the opulent victory monuments put up by the military, are seen as part of an ongoing occupation by the military and a southern Sinhala colonization of the north and east. Central government driven processes emerging from a southern Sinhala sensibility were seen as marginalizing the people in the north and east and as contradicting the government's rhetoric regarding reconciliation. The government's many previous attempts at instituting reconciliation processes – the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms and the Office of Missing Persons were mentioned - were considered insincere. It was stated that while the two processes were valuable, their insufficiently supported implementation and the lack of clear government support for their work indicated that these attempts were directed at audiences elsewhere and had little to do with addressing problems in affected areas. The government's sincerity with regard to monumentalizing reconciliation was constantly questioned on the above basis. We were also told that reconciliation without justice and accountability was merely the continuing of domination.

The Sinhala military families felt that the state had abandoned them recently after long years of adulation and there was resentment expressed by parents at the loss of their children, and former soldiers bemoaned the loss of their youth, their family life, and health to the conflict. Respondents all over were of the opinion that any reconciliation initiative that the state participates in should be kept separate from politicians who would definitely take over.

Our main findings with regard to affected peoples' ideas about state monumentalizing can be summarized as follows:

In a context where the military and police prevent people from carrying out memorialization, and persons are taken to court for memorialization activities, talking of a national memorial/monument was shocking to people and was considered misleading and disingenuous of the government. People in the north and east expressed frustration, anger and distrust at the idea of a national monument. People continue to experience pushback from the Police and military when they attempt to memorialize and commemorate the dead. In the immediate aftermath of the war's end the military had even destroyed the LTTE martyrs cemeteries that many families had considered important memorials to their lost loved ones. The military had built barracks, parking lots, and toilets on them and in one instance attempted cultivation on the burial grounds and feed the people the produce from that land. The people experienced such actions as offensive and as indicative of state malevolence directed at the Tamil people. They therefore had little faith in the government's good intentions. The National Monument initiative was seen as more evidence of the state attempting to mislead the people. People wanted to first be permitted to memorialize in their own places on their own initiative. At the moment persons engaged in memorialization are even facing prosecution on disingenuous charges regarding public order. In many meetings in the north, the request was made that the destroyed martyrs' cemeteries be reconstructed. Rehabilitated former LTTE carders who face daily surveillance from the authorities and frequent interruptions to their daily lives wondered if they would even be permitted to travel to Colombo to visit such a monument and if the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) it currently stands would permit them to do so. In the context of emerging restrictions to freedom of expression, through the online safety bill for instance, and the existence of the PTA, participants were confused as to what a memorial in Colombo would actually contain. They were also concerned as to what principles of memorialization would stay when the government changed. There was a suggestion that memorialization should be legally ensured. There should be a special act for safeguarding people's right to commemorate and memorialize, some persons stated. (The committee notes that the right to memorialize is currently recognized in the Office for Reparations Act No. 34 of 2018).

Affected persons, many from impoverished backgrounds were already facing great economic hardship. The economic crisis has exacerbated such hardship. The government proposing a monument at such a time was not demonstrating any concern with the plight of affected persons at this time of crisis, it was felt. We encountered women who had lost their husbands to the war or whose husbands or brothers were disappeared, we met men and women whose children had disappeared and almost all of them, in addition to the trauma of the loss of loved ones were experiencing severe economic hardship. We were told that affected persons, especially women heads of household were self-harming due to poverty. "Women are committing suicide because they cannot pay the light bill." In some very remote villages in the Ampara district people had had very little interaction with the state and almost no support throughout the war and even after. They spoke of receiving one tranche of compensation from the state for their loss in the 1990s and no support of any kind since then. For these people, it was difficult to think of the usefulness of a monument. They asked that such monuments be in

the form of useful construction – homes, toilets that could be in the name of their lost loved one. If the monument was to be effective it should serve the community, they argued. What was apparent in the consultations was that the many social and economic problems that the affected persons with lost and disappeared family members faced were in no way addressed by the state. Some in peripheral areas seem to have been completely neglected. The state needs to direct funds towards the social and economic well-being of these people in a sustained manner. People very clearly articulated that the building of a monument was not an economic priority during a daily worsening economic crisis. The families in the north and east were severely affected by the economic crisis and were facing additional stress. While the soldier families were less affected economically due to the salaries and pensions that they continued to receive, there was regret and resentment expressed by parents at the loss of their children and former soldiers mentioned the loss of their youth and health to the conflict.

Not enough has yet been done to resolve the tensions and the fallout from three decades of war. There is no resolution of enmities either at the national level or at the community level to enable further healing through a national monument. There was bitterness at the ongoing military presence in the north and east; and the state was described as treating the people of the north and east as 2nd class citizens. In these circumstances, collective national memorialization was not a possibility at the moment. At the Batticaloa consultation, it was also stated that the state's attempts at reconciliation and memorialization were not sincere. They pointed to the 2016 process where the report of the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation mechanisms was not even received by the President. They stated that the government was wasting the time of intellectuals by engaging in such a process every few years with no tangible results visible on the ground. While institutions were set up, the Office of Missing Persons, for instance, the government was doing little to support them and ensure that they were successful. In the east where different communities polarized during the war were compelled to live next to each other, the tensions continued to prevail. In Batticaloa, wartime enmities that flared up periodically between Tamil and Muslim communities were exacerbated by the Easter bombings. In Trincomalee, the difficulties with which a tense peace was maintained between Tamils and Sinhalese were revealed to us through participants' concern as to the monument initiative dredging up old enmities. Members of the northern Muslim community expelled by the LTTE in 1990 who have now returned spoke of their own stories of displacement being silenced and asked that history writing be a way of memorializing.

While most affected persons were uninterested and even dismissive of the idea of a national monument in Colombo, there was interest in the possibility of local memorializing and community-level initiatives supported by the state. All across the affected areas communities roundly rejected the idea of a monument in Colombo. They felt that they would not at all be represented by a monument in Colombo due to difficulties of access and unfamiliarity with the space. If a monument is to be constructed in Colombo it will be disconnected from the lived realities of affected persons and will be a symbolic gesture meaningful only to those outside. "It will be another tourist attraction for people to take pictures in front of." We were even told – "you can do it but don't involve us in it." Some thought that the state, by building a monument in Colombo, was saying that monuments in the affected areas would no longer be necessary.

There were many alternative suggestions with regard to locating monuments in close proximity to affected communities. In some areas, a district-level monument was considered adequate. In other areas, there were suggestions to have monuments to commemorate significant events. The massacres of Arantalawa and Gonagala were mentioned as already having monuments. The massacre of Kattankudi is memorialized through the preservation of the damaged building. Events occurring in the Jaffna peninsula currently have no markers. In areas where the distance to the main town in the District was significant, the suggestion was for monuments in villages in close proximity to the people. Others wanted them near their households in order that they become part of daily remembrance activities.

However, families of the disappeared do not want the closure that memorialization of the dead represents. They want information regarding the plight of their loved ones. At the Batticaloa consultation, representatives of the families of the disappeared were not in support of the state initiative to build monuments. Their emphasis was on the state providing information about their lost loved one. The LTTE cadres who were handed over to the military in 2009 were brought up in both the north and the east. The state had to account for such events before collective memorialization was possible, we were told.

A national monument as currently conceived does not address the large population of persons with disabilities left behind by the war. How will the monument represent and comment on those living with disabilities as a consequence of the war? Many persons have been disabled as a result of the war and a monument to the commemoration of the dead will have no relevance to their particular experience. How will the monument address their experience and the transformation of their life that occurred as a result of the war? These questions were raised by representatives of persons with disabilities.

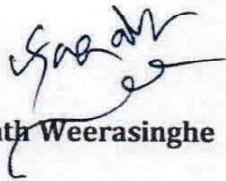
Families of soldiers suffered from “monument fatigue”. The “ranaviru” community and their families who were resentful of the recent neglect they were subjected to after decades of state adulation were skeptical of the project. They were of the opinion that there were far too many memorials where they were compelled to commemorate their loss. Some of these memorials were subjected to outrageous neglect. The community was suspicious of the proposal, unsure of what it could achieve and suggested the committee itself was being manipulated for political ends. They were ultimately agreeable to a national monument being built but wanted to have nothing personally to do with such a project.

From the above findings, the committee concluded that there was still much that needed to be done at the national and local level to address historical enmities, prevailing tensions, and ongoing difficulties faced by the people due to the war and its aftermath. Building a national monument of the kind envisaged in the brief from the President’s Office therefore should happen possibly after people’s current concerns are addressed over the course of the next five years. The committee therefore recommends the following as measures that need to be taken to bring about a shared understanding regarding the past to enable a monument for national healing.

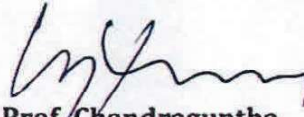
RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE COMMITTEE

1. **The Committee recommends the construction of an iconic building to function as a repository of artistic and cultural expressions relevant and associated with the 26 years of war and conflict in Sri Lanka.** The committee is of the opinion that artistic and publicity materials produced during the conflict from all parties to the conflict should be gathered and curated in ways that provide information as to the sensibilities produced and acted upon at the time. Such informational material should include that of nationalist groups in the south, those working to build peace, the LTTE and LTTE sympathizers, as well as those opposing the LTTE in the north. The gathering of such material and its curation can be done with government support but in different locations throughout the country by different organizations that have the capacity to do so.
2. During the entirety of the conflict various groups and individuals have been engaging with the question of memorialization and reconciliation in different ways. These include the work of members of the present committee and constitute a rich body of work that should- as part of the process of monument building - be made available to the public at a central location. **There should be a repository of existing cultural works that attempt to record, comment, or otherwise engage with the country's difficult past.**
3. **Reconciliation initiatives that have been carried out in the first ten years after the end of the war also constitute a large body of work that should be gathered and showcased in a location chosen by the government.**
4. There are ongoing reconciliation, healing and memorialization efforts at the community level in the north and east that must be encouraged and supported with minimum interference from the state. Our findings indicate that people engage in acts of memorialization on a daily basis and that community groups are working for communal healing. Any memorials that look to elicit ownership and support of aggrieved persons and achieve communal healing must take people's everyday requirements into consideration. **The state should develop a community memorialization fund to which groups can apply for support.** A committee should be formed to develop a set of criteria and to manage such a fund for a period of 5 years. The fund should be decentralized for communities to access at the district and divisional secretariat levels.
5. **We recommend that the President make known to the public the position of the state regarding reconciliation and people's right to memorialize.** The military in the north and east does not permit any acts of memorialization. It is essential that the military is instructed to not disrupt civilian attempts to memorialize. We recommend that the state take measures to ensure that the people of the north and east experience life as equal citizens of the country.
6. **After a five-year period during which the above is carried out it may be possible to revisit the idea of a national monument** to which all the country's people can lay claim as one of communal healing and reconciliation.

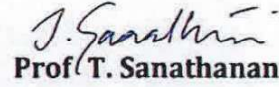
Note: Fieldwork and report preparation were done by Prof. Jagath Weerasinghe, Prof. Chandraguptha Thenuwara, Prof. T. Sanathanan and Prof. Farzana F. Haniffa.



Prof. Jagath Weerasinghe
(Chairperson)



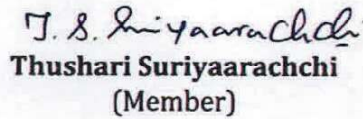
Prof. Chandraguptha Thenuwara
(Member)



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Prof. Farzana F. Haniffa
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Thushari Suriyaarachchi
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