



NO PLACE FOR SOLDIERS: THE MILITARISATION OF SRI LANKA'S SCHOOLS

June 2020



**SRI
LANKA
CAMPAIGN**
FOR PEACE & JUSTICE

An analysis of the Sri Lankan Army's presence in schools (January 2018 - December 2019) and what it means for war affected communities in Sri Lanka.

Contents

1. An overview of the army's presence in schools	5
2. Where are these activities taking place – and how do they vary by location?	6
3. Why is the army so heavily involved in schools in the North and East?	8
3.2 'Winning hearts and minds' or social control and surveillance?	9
3.3 Impunity for human rights violations: a risk to child welfare?	10
3.4 Restricting economic recovery	12
Conclusion	13
Recommendations	14

For further information or media inquiries about this report please contact info@srilankacampaign.org.

Introduction

In the Tamil majority North and East of Sri Lanka, areas which were worst affected by Sri Lanka's long and brutal civil war, soldiers from the Sri Lankan army are today involved in school activities with disturbing frequency. The penetration of the military into everyday civilian life has long been a major concern of local communities, with research by the [Sri Lanka Campaign](#) and [other human rights groups](#) highlighting the deep sense of insecurity, fear and mistrust that accompanies their presence. However, efforts to systematically document the military's increasingly visible role in the education sector – and to understand its scale, purpose, and impact – have been relatively limited.¹

Here we attempt to address that gap, by combining recent data about the military's involvement in schools with insights from local activists about this phenomenon.² Our research is based on analysis of two years-worth of army press releases (between January 2018 and December 2019), which record a total of 351 occasions where government soldiers participated in school activities, more than three quarters of them in the North and East. We also interviewed three Tamil activists working directly with affected communities in the Northern Province in early 2020 to provide context and depth to the data.

Although the military claims benign intentions behind its engagement in Sri Lankan schools, our research suggests their involvement and disproportionate presence in minority areas has more sinister implications.

Regular interactions with Tamil school children – many too young to remember the mass atrocities committed by the Sri Lankan armed forces in the final days of the war in 2009 – are today seen by some community members as another form of social control, enabling surveillance of minority groups and the stifling of dissent. Meanwhile, serious questions persist about the potential economic harms associated with this activity, as well as the risks posed to child welfare, given the pervasive culture of impunity for serious human rights violations by members of the armed forces against both adults and children.

Despite some recent progress by the government of Sri Lanka in returning occupied lands to their rightful civilian owners, our findings offer a reminder of the multi-faceted nature of the continued militarisation of the North and East of Sri Lanka – and the pressing need for meaningful reform of the military, and reductions in their overall presence, that would enable a return to ordinary civilian life among communities still recovering from the war. This remains an essential prerequisite for sustainable peace in Sri Lanka.

¹ The most important recent contribution to this topic was a report by the Jaffna-based think tank, the Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research (ACPR), looking at the employment of pre-school teachers by the Civil-Security Department in the Vanni. See: [Civil Security Department: the Deep Militarisation of the Vanni](#) (September 2017)

1. An overview of the army's presence in schools

In recent years activists have raised concerns about military-run in schools the North and East of Sri Lanka. In a [major report](#) in 2017, researchers examined the way in which the army, through its Civil Security Department (CSD), was using the employment of pre-school teachers in the Vanni as a means of conducting surveillance and creating economic dependency among war-affected communities. Our data shows that the military's role in schools is not only continuing, but also that it also extends across many *civilian-run* schools in war-affected areas.

Between January 2018 and December 2019, the army website published press releases about a total of 351 occasions where troops visited schools in Sri Lanka or were involved in school activities. The Sri Lanka Campaign compiled this information into a database, which is available to view [here](#).

These press releases document the army's involvement in an extraordinarily wide range of activities during these interactions – ranging from building schools, to conducting leadership training sessions. For the purposes of our research, we classified these activities into eight broad categories: gift giving, cleaning schools, construction, training, educational tours, seminars, sports, and events. A breakdown of this data – by type and location – is provided in the charts below.

Gift giving was by far the most frequent activity, with the army presenting items to children at schools on 148 occasions. The most common gifts were schoolbooks, stationery, and bags, but also included bicycles, IT equipment, sporting goods, and musical instruments.

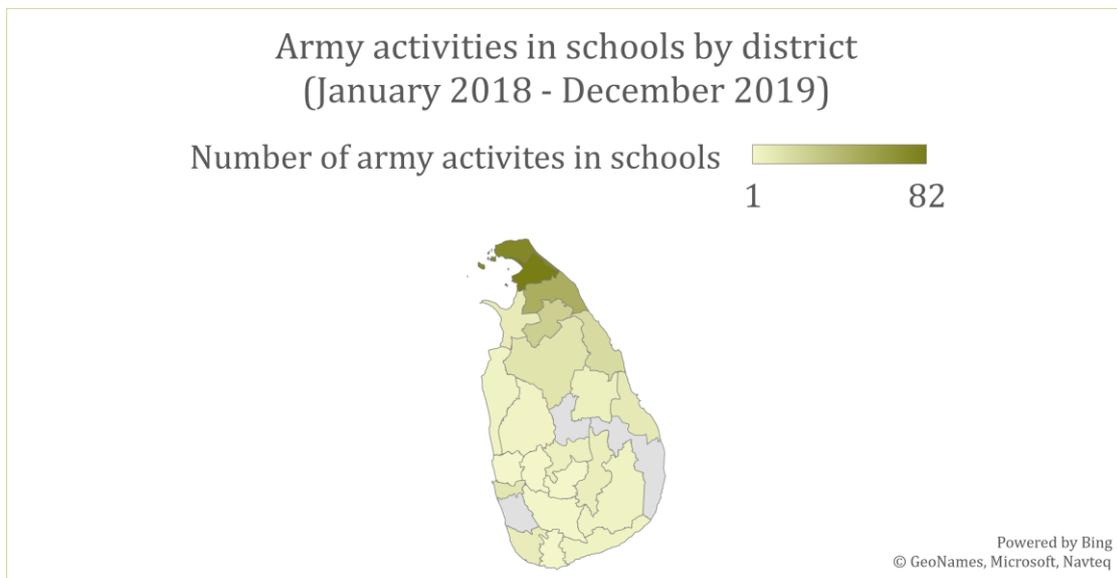
The army cleaned 49 schools in this period, often alongside students and teachers as part of 'Shramadana' ('gift of labour') programmes, while construction and repairs on school grounds took place on 43 occasions. Educational tours of military facilities for school children were conducted on 22 occasions, with Palaly military airfield most frequently visited by children, including many of pre-school age. No other activity occurred more than 20 times.



Army troops from Security Forces Headquarters (SFHQ)-Jaffna "making yet another gesture of goodwill and reconciliation" with the construction of a pre-school building in Jaffna, sponsored by the government of South Korea. (22 September 2018, bit.ly/3dlQNwt)

2. Where are these activities taking place – and how do they vary by location?

In total, the army reported 271 interactions with school children in the Northern and Eastern Provinces – making up more than three quarters of the total interactions across the country. 29 of these interactions were in the Eastern Province, with 242 in the Northern Province. These are the only provinces in Sri Lanka where the Sinhalese ethnic group is not in the majority. The Northern Province is dominated by Tamils, while the Eastern Province has a mixed population of Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhalese people. The Sri Lankan Army almost exclusively employs Sinhalese men, in stark contrast to the demography in these areas. The army interacted with school children less than 20 times in each of the other provinces.

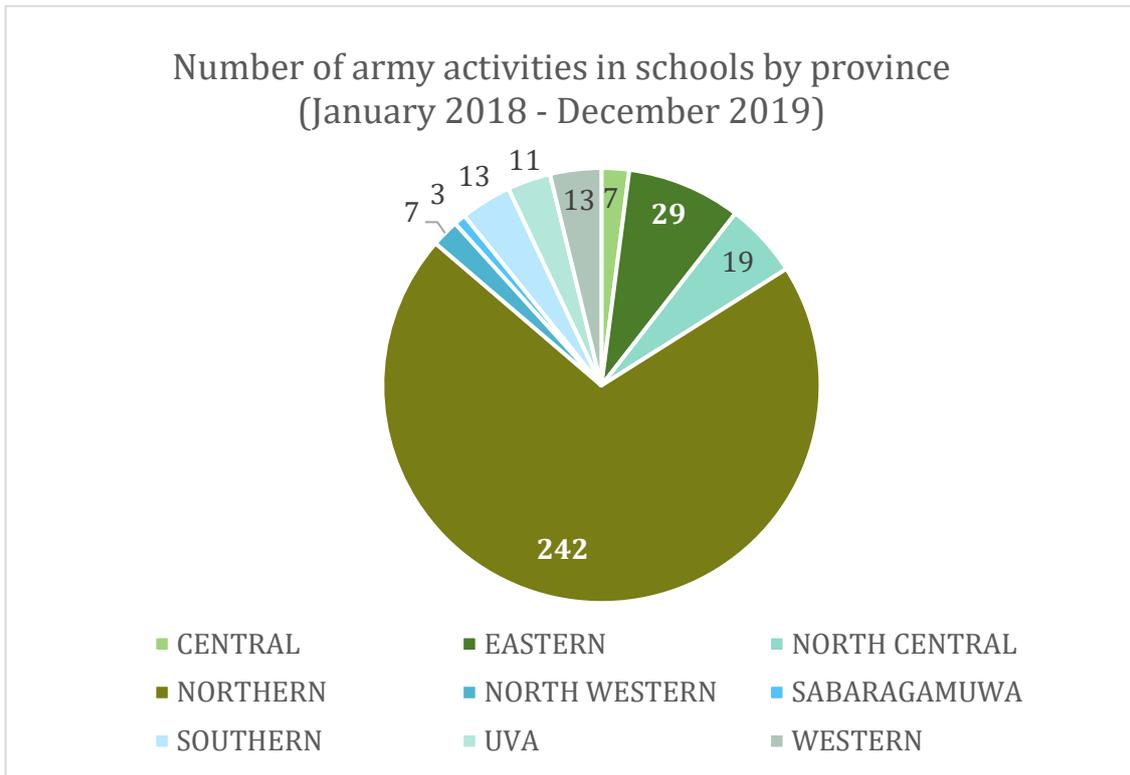


The three districts with the highest number of interactions between school children and the army were Kilinochchi (82), Jaffna (75) and Mullaitivu (49) – all in the Northern Province. These represent more than half of the total number.

Outside the North and East, the district with the highest engagement was Anuradhapura, with 13 events. In the capital, Colombo, the troops participated in activities at school only 12 times. No other district had more than ten interactions between the army and schools.

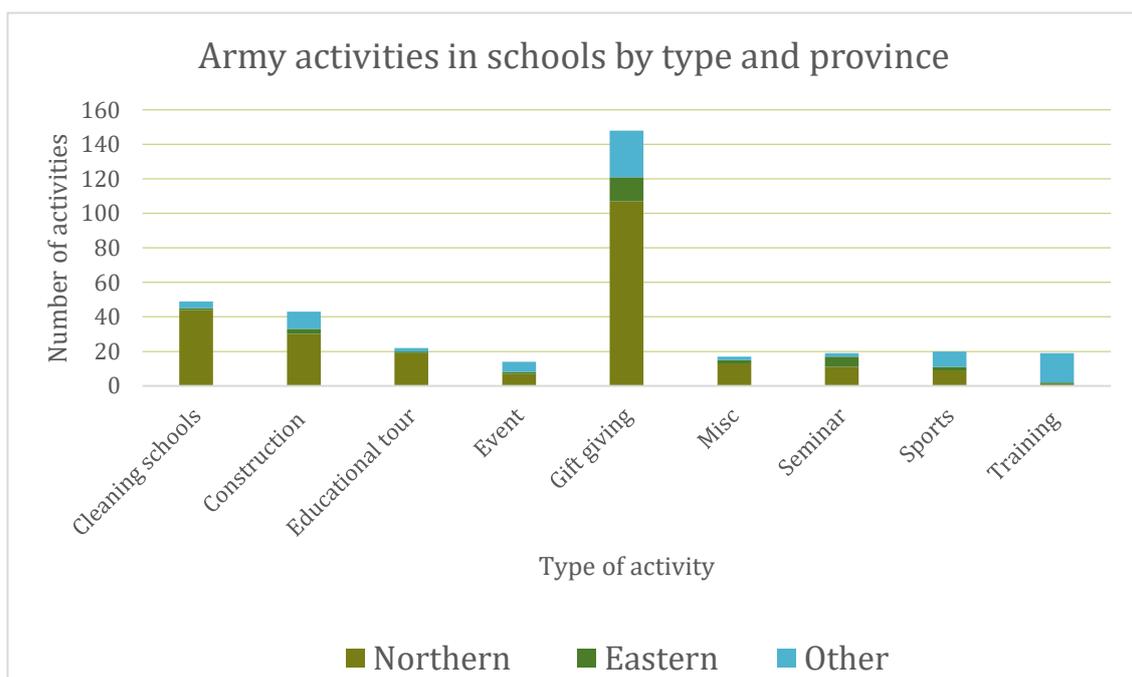


Students from two pre-schools in Jaffna visit Palaly airport alongside members of the 521 Brigade as part of an “educational tour.” An army press release states that “parents and teachers who joined the tour appreciated the assistance of the troops for organizing the visit.” (1 May 2018, bit.ly/2XppAmR)



The types of activities in which the army were engaged during the period varied significantly by area. Cleaning schools, gift giving, and construction took place almost exclusively in the Tamil-majority North and East, while training and sports were more common in the South.

Almost three quarters of the gift giving ceremonies took place in the Northern Province. Similarly, 90% of the occasions where troops cleaned schools took place in that province. By contrast, the army delivered training events in the North and East only twice in these two years; with 90% of this activity instead taking place outside of these provinces.



3. Why is the army so heavily involved in schools in the North and East?

Among the most obvious explanations for the disproportionate frequency of army interactions with school children in the North and East, is the fact that the overall presence of the military in these areas is itself highly disproportionate. Eleven years after the war ended, these war-affected provinces retain alarmingly high levels of militarisation. For example, 14 of 21 of the Sri Lankan Army's divisions are today [stationed](#) in the Northern Province. In 2017, [researchers estimated](#) that more than 60,000 troops were based in Mullaitivu district alone, approximately one soldier for every two civilians. This presence has been bolstered by the continued high levels of [spending](#) on the military since the war, despite the end of the armed conflict.

On another interpretation, the army's disproportionate engagement with schools in the North and East of the country might be seen as a reflection of economic need in this area, and the poor state of public infrastructure and relatively [high levels of deprivation](#) resulting from the war. The military has increasingly shifted from defence to humanitarian and development-related activities in the post-war period – a trend that was embodied by the formal fusion of the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development Authority in 2011.

The army appears to regard its role as a provider of development and humanitarian services in war-affected areas as uncontroversial. For example, in 2018, nearly all of Sri Lanka's Security Force Headquarters based in the North and East [outlined](#) such work as forming part of their key objectives: "maintaining essential services" (Jaffna), "initiat[ing] ... social welfare programmes to enhance the living standard of all communities" (Vanni), "uplift[ing] the livelihood of the people" (Mullaitivu).

In [press releases](#) about its activities – which in addition to those mentioned here have included building homes for poor families and carrying out public works – the army frequently refers to its goal of "winning hearts and minds" in the community. Often closely linked to this aim is that of promoting a nationalistic form of post-war reconciliation, [expressed](#) through objectives such as "build[ing] a harmonious nation", "foster[ing] a common national identity," "promot[ing] unity."

Such objectives may appear relatively benign to some observers. However, a closer reading of the army's increasing presence in Sri Lankan schools suggests forms of engagement which are deeply problematic.

Troops from the 593 Brigade renovate a pre-school and children's park in Mullaitivu in what an army press release described as "another move of reconciliation and ethnic harmony." The opening ceremony, which included the distribution of "gift packs" to children, was attended by Major General Ruwan Wanigasooriya (right). Wanigasooriya is a former Army Media Spokesperson who has regularly defended the armed forces over allegations of war crimes. (7 September 2018, bit.ly/2zLuhyJ)



3.2 'WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS' OR SOCIAL CONTROL AND SURVEILLANCE?

When asked about the reason for the military's presence in schools in the North and East, one Tamil activist who the Sri Lanka Campaign spoke to – an individual working with the war-affected communities across the North and East – was clear: “it's definitely about control.” In their view, the expansion of the military into educational settings was part of a wider process of physical and social coercion by the military – with the focus on children designed to entrench and normalise those patterns. “It means that no one will flinch when a new [army] camp crops up. It tells them [the children] that it's normal to pass through 6 or 7 checkpoints every day.”

The same activist stressed the wider political function of the army's presence in schools, and its role in advancing the idea of national unity without the need to address the past. In their words: “It's the big agenda of building 'one nation'. Tamil people don't refer to the military as 'our military'. It is about instilling that idea in them.”

The army has openly linked its role in social service provision with a desire to build support for the Sri Lankan state and foster a unified national identity. Nonetheless, viewed in light of these insights, statements by senior members of the armed forces – hinting that the focus on children is driven by a perception of their *susceptibility* to the army's agenda – read as particularly disturbing. For instance, in May 2018 former Major General Dharshana Hettiarachchi described the military's shifting priorities as follows: “what we have realised is that it is extremely difficult to change the mindsets of some of the adults, who still have different views and ideas. Therefore, we switched our target group from adults to young students.”



“Showing goodwill towards the student community and giving one more round of assistance to overcome transport hardships,” troops from the 531 Brigade distribute 50 new bicycles “to the most deserving students” at a ceremony at a school in Jaffna. The event was attended by Dharshana Hettiarachchi (centre right), who previously ran Sri Lanka's post-war “rehabilitation scheme”, described by the UN as amounting to a system of “wrongful imprisonment.” (13 March 2019, bit.ly/2Bj3Pwu)

Another Tamil activist with whom the Sri Lanka Campaign spoke, a religious leader from Mannar, emphasised a further aspect when explaining the purpose behind the military's presence in schools. “It's about controlling the people, but it's also *obtaining information* from the community.” On this reading – and consistent with earlier research on the widespread use of surveillance by state security forces in the North and East – the army's engagement appears driven by a desire to monitor local communities and gather intelligence about them. As they put it: “everything the families [of the children] are doing – talking to priests, talking to civil society groups – the children know about it and come to school with it.” It is an interpretation which suggests that families in war-affected areas may be afraid to speak openly in front of their children, worried that what they might say will be relayed to army officials in the school environment. Human rights groups have [highlighted](#) this troubling dynamic before. In 2016, one war survivor from Batticaloa told researchers, “we are afraid to talk to our children about what happened [during the war]. We don't want to risk them talking about it at school or elsewhere. We may get into trouble with the military”.

While further research is needed, the evidence gathered here suggests that rather than furthering reconciliation, the military's role in schools, alike other forms of militarisation in the North and East, may instead be fueling the sense of insecurity and mistrust felt by Tamil communities.

As to the whether the military's role in schools provided any positive benefits, one individual – a social activist and researcher from Jaffna – was dismissive: “It is propaganda. They are not doing as much as they would like you to think.” This was a perception reinforced by our review of the data: in the majority of gift giving cases, the army were distributing gifts paid for and provided by other organisations. Yet the elaborate ceremonies in which children received these items directly from uniformed soldiers, and the self-congratulatory army press releases accompanying such events, often implied that the recipients owed gratitude to the army. As civil society activists have [observed](#) previously: “a disturbing aspect of the army's philanthropic initiatives is the indication that they appear to view these as part of a charitable impulse dedicated to a population which in turn is expected to show servility and gratitude.”



Troops from SFHQ-Vanni distribute gift parcels and school accessories at a pre-school in Vavuniya. As is common of such occasions, the event was jointly organised with the support of a civil society organisation – this time, the 'Hemas Outreach Foundation' who distributed parcels "among the children gathered at the ... school premises in Vavuniya as smiling children lined up to receive [them]." (4 January 2018, bit.ly/2XSgWwq)

3.3 IMPUNITY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS: A RISK TO CHILD WELFARE?

In assessing the army's presence in educational settings in Sri Lanka, consideration also needs to be given to its wider implications for child welfare.

There is credible evidence that the army committed multiple mass atrocity crimes against Tamil civilians during the war, including the deliberate shelling of civilian targets (including hospitals), and the denial of humanitarian aid to wounded and starving civilians. The UN has estimated that between 40,000 and 70,000 civilians were killed in the final months of the war – a significant proportion of whom were children.

While there are no clear figures on the number of children killed during the final stages of the war, there is credible evidence that both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan armed forces committed crimes against children. Investigations by the UN and civil society organisations have catalogued an appalling list of alleged crimes by members of the Sri Lankan armed forces. Dozens of children, including many infants, are [believed](#) to have been forcibly disappeared after being loaded on to buses by the armed forces at the end of the war. In 2015, an investigation by the UN [concluded](#) that there were “reasonable grounds to believe that a number of ... individuals not or no longer taking direct part in hostilities, including children, were ... extrajudicially executed.”

To date, no one has been held accountable for alleged atrocity crimes committed during and after the war. Nor has any meaningful security sector reform taken place. Senior officials credibly accused of these crimes, including those who held command responsibility in the final stages of the war, now occupy senior positions in Sri Lanka's military and government.



Army Commander Lieutenant Shavendra Silva at a reforestation project event, attended by over 1000 students from Kilinochchi. Silva, who has been described as “arguably the most important frontline commander in the 2008-2009 war” and is credibly accused of war crimes, was formally sanctioned by the US State Department in February 2020 over his alleged involvement in serious human rights abuses. (21 October 2019, bit.ly/304P7nd)

Sri Lanka's criminal justice system has repeatedly failed to deliver accountability for crimes committed by members of the armed forces against Tamil children. For example, despite widespread allegations of sexual violence, there has been only one known case in which military personnel have successfully been convicted – that involving sixteen year-old Kirshanti Kumaraswamy, who was raped and murdered in 1996. Disturbingly, the Sri Lankan state has continued to actively shield perpetrators from justice. In March 2020, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa pardoned and released from jail Staff Sergeant Sunil Ratnayake, a senior military official convicted in 2015 for the brutal massacre of eight Tamil civilians, including two children.

But the problem of impunity in the Sri Lankan army extends beyond crimes committed during the war. In 2007, over 100 Sri Lankan peacekeepers were identified as being part of a child sex ring that operated for three years during a UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti. Although most of the accused were repatriated by the Sri Lankan government, none were criminally prosecuted.

This deeply rooted pattern of impunity for crimes against children – and against members of the Tamil community specifically – raises serious questions about the risks to child welfare associated with regular interactions between army troops and children in the North and East.

At a more general level, further research is needed to understand how such interactions may be impinging on the rights of children under international law, particularly as regards their educational development. While human rights groups have long raised concerns about the social and psychological impact of military involvement in education and youth services in other countries around the world, only rarely have these been connected specifically to the Sri Lankan context. As noted in one recent civil society submission to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the military's involvement in educational settings could constitute potential violations of “the rights of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion under CRC Article 14 ... [the rights to] education directed to develop cultural identify, language and values under Article 29, and the rights of ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities under Article 30.” The CRC subsequently recommended in its concluding observations that “all schools currently run by the military [be] transferred back under the control of the Ministry of Education.”

3.4 RESTRICTING ECONOMIC RECOVERY

In the years immediately after the war, the army was heavily involved in infrastructure development in the North and East, with senior officials keen to emphasise the importance of the armed forces to the economic recovery of war-affected areas. However, over a decade on, the army continues to be involved in a wide range of economic activities and appears to have no plan to return these to civilian control. This includes, as highlighted in this briefing, the role played by the armed forces in the construction and maintenance of schools. But it has also encompassed a broad range of profit generating activities, including most notably in [agriculture](#) and [tourism](#).

While further research into the economic effects of militarisation is much needed, activists and civil society groups have raised serious concerns about the impacts of these kinds of activities on the sustainable economic development of war-affected war areas. For example, a 2018 [report](#) on the military's involvement in the tourism sector found that "businesses run by the military ... are staffed by their own personnel, directly unseating potential livelihood opportunities ... The loss of livelihood and profits experienced in the tourism sector will also be experienced by the numerous other sectors within which the military is conducting businesses." An important question that therefore arises here is whether army's role in constructing and maintaining schools could be denying employment opportunities to local people. The army does not appear to be as involved in these roles outside of the North and East, where the private sector generally carries out these tasks.

Thirteen Sri Lankan National Guard (SLNG) troops under the command of SFHQ Mullaitivu maintain a pre-school ground in Thaddidaymale as part of a Shramadana ('gift of labor') programme. (24 December 2018, bit.ly/3gKkhGh)



Conclusion

The military's intrusion into schools is just one part of a much wider process of militarisation in war-affected areas. Yet it raises unique questions that deserve much greater attention from both the public and decision-makers – including in terms of its implications for human rights, the prospects of meaningful reconciliation, child welfare, and sustainable economic development.

Frequent visits by army troops to schools appear specifically designed to help normalise the militarisation of civilian life, and to facilitate social control and surveillance of the Tamil population. As well as projecting an image of power and authority over young people, there are troubling indications that the impact of the military's activities are being felt well beyond the school-gates – with potentially chilling effects on the ability of parents and families to express themselves openly. While the army continues to justify its role in education as a means of generating community support and fostering national unity, many of its interventions may well be having the opposite effect – furthering the sense of insecurity and mistrust felt by many Tamils, and making the prospects of lasting reconciliation even more remote.

Despite some limited steps by the previous government to reduce the footprint of the armed forces, the North and East of Sri Lanka continues to be heavily militarised. Indeed, what little progress has been made now appears at risk of being reversed. Following the Easter Sunday bombings in April 2019 and the election of Gotabaya Rajapaksa in November 2019, war-affected areas have witnessed the re-introduction of numerous checkpoints on roads and at army camps. These are not replicated in other parts of the island. Also of concern are [reports](#) that the Sri Lankan army have seized dozens of schools across the North and East of Sri Lanka with a view to establishing quarantine centres for suspected COVID-19 patients, allegedly without any consultation with local communities or education administrators. The armed forces have assumed a large role during the COVID-19 pandemic – tasked with leading the response instead of Sri Lanka's highly respected public health officials. In one of the most worrying developments since the change of government, on 2 June the President [announced](#) the formation of a 'Task Force', composed entirely of Sinhala military and police officials, mandated with "build[ing] a Secure Country [and a] Disciplined, Virtuous and Lawful Society."

It is vital that the ongoing militarisation of civic space in Sri Lanka, including in schools, continues to be vigorously questioned and challenged. Members of the international community have a key role to play in this and it is essential that they begin to lead by example. Recent events in which the armed forces of key members states – including [the US](#) and [the UK](#) – have ventured into Sri Lankan schools risks setting a worrying precedent and normalising the role of the military in schools. We take this opportunity to remind those member states, as well as the government of Sri Lanka, of the conditions that they have previously [recognised](#) as essential for building lasting peace in Sri Lanka: "the ending of military involvement in civilian activities, the resumption of livelihoods and the restoration of normality to civilian life."

Recommendations

To the government of Sri Lanka:

- Instruct members of the armed forces to withdraw from all civilian activities, including in schools.

To members of the international community:

- Urge the government of Sri Lanka to end the involvement of the armed forces in civilian activities, including in schools, in accordance with Resolution 30/1.
- Ensure that aid spending and defense cooperation does not contribute to, or help normalise, the presence of the Sri Lankan armed forces in schools (including, for example, through the presence of members of their own armed forces in school settings).
- Provide support and protection to activists challenging patterns of militarisation in the North and East of Sri Lanka.

To donors and civil society organisations:

- Refrain from supporting initiatives and programmes which contribute to the presence of the armed forces in schools.



www.srilankacampaign.org

info@srilankacampaign.org

[@SLCampaign](https://www.instagram.com/SLCampaign)