

Human Security in Post-War Sri Lanka: Challenges and Opportunities for Accountability and Governance Reform

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Abstract

With its decades-long separatist agenda and its consistent failures to achieve sustainable human security, Sri Lanka has always been on the brink of a crisis. The 2022 devastating economic crisis is merely a culmination of the years of this agenda, corruption and the failure to achieve accountability and human security. Indeed, this economic crisis has underscored the indivisibility of human rights in the country. This paper's main aim is to evaluate some of the most important factors contributing to human insecurity in post-conflict Sri Lanka. It does so with the intent of analysing the challenges and recommending opportunities for human security. In addition, this paper examines the academic evidence for the role that accountability can play as part of a spectrum of interventions linking redress, peacebuilding, and reconciliation to human security. This examination derives from a desktop review of the current literature by searching multiple databases to identify relevant academic publications, books, journal articles, programme evaluations, and other influential sources, including data from peer-reviewed journals. The main finding of this paper is that the failure to address pre- and post-war issues can be attributed to the country's governance system failing to identify human security as a high priority. This article will consequently analyse some of the greatest threats to human security. The resultant discussions will provide recommendations for opportunities to address human rights challenges in the country.

Keywords: human security; post-conflict Sri Lanka; governance reform; peacebuilding and reconciliation; economic and human rights crisis



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Introduction

Sri Lanka's post-war trajectory continues to be shaped by entrenched challenges to human security, including unresolved ethnic tensions, deep-rooted governance failures, and acute economic instability (HRW 2025b; Joshi and Wallensteen 2018). These structural issues, intensified by the country's 2022 economic collapse, have drawn renewed attention to the indivisibility of human rights and the pressing need for comprehensive, sustainable peacebuilding strategies (HRW 2023b; World Bank 2023a; Amnesty International 2022; ISHR 2022). Despite the extensive body of literature on transitional justice, reconciliation, and post-conflict development (Moyo-Kupeta 2024; Seul 2019; Skaar 2013), many studies have approached these themes in isolation focusing narrowly on ethnic conflict resolution (Siampakou 2024; Hughes and Kostovicova 2019; ICTJ 2017; Aiken 2013) or institutional reform (Deane 2023), without fully engaging with the broader framework of human security (Ginty and Richmond 2013; Fischer 2011).

This study situates itself within this complex and evolving landscape, offering a holistic analysis of the threats to human security in post-war Sri Lanka. It diverges from prevailing approaches by explicitly linking the erosion of human security to systemic failures in accountability and governance. Central to this analysis is the role of impunity, both historical and ongoing, in sustaining economic vulnerability, political instability, and social fragmentation. Rather than treating human rights and security as discrete domains, this paper argues for their fundamental interdependence and presents a critical perspective on how their disarticulation perpetuates structural violence (Galtung 1969) and weakens peacebuilding outcomes.

By adopting an integrated analytical lens that combines literature review, policy critique, and case-based insights, this study aims to generate actionable recommendations for reform. It contributes to the existing discourse by foregrounding the underexplored intersections between economic collapse, human rights violations, and the persistent absence of transitional justice. As of late 2024, Sri Lanka remains at a critical juncture: the continued use of repressive legislation such as the 1979 Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) (*Tamil Guardian* 2024; 2025a; 2025b), political interference in judicial processes (HRW 2025b), and economic policy conditions imposed under the IMF bailout (*Reuters* 2024; 2025b) have intensified calls for democratic reforms and rights-based governance. These developments underscore the continued salience of human security as both a framework for critique and a roadmap for recovery. In doing so, this paper seeks to advance a more inclusive and people-centred vision of post-conflict recovery, one that is grounded in accountability, democratic governance, and respect for human dignity.

Background and Context

In recent years, Sri Lanka has faced a range of complex human security challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, mass protests, and an unprecedented economic

collapse (Ranaweera 2023). Between March and July 2022, widespread civil unrest emerged in response to the financial crisis, which was marked by soaring food prices, fuel shortages, and prolonged power outages (US Department of State 2022, 2). Citizens from diverse socioeconomic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds mobilised to demand political reform, democratic accountability, and redress for long-standing patterns of corruption and economic mismanagement.

While the 2022 crisis is a recent manifestation of instability, the roots of human insecurity in Sri Lanka run far deeper. The legacy of nearly three decades of civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) remains one of the most significant threats to sustainable peace and development (Deane 2016, 1; Deane 2023). The LTTE led a violent campaign for a separate Tamil state in the north and east, while government forces engaged in extensive counterinsurgency operations. The conflict produced a well-documented pattern of human rights violations, including extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, torture, and harassment by security forces and intelligence agencies (ICG 2010, para. 4; HRW 2023; Samarakoon 2023, 89).

During this period, Sri Lanka was reported to have one of the world's highest rates of enforced disappearances. Both state and non-state actors were implicated in systematic abuses, including the targeting of human rights defenders and activists, the recruitment of child soldiers, and mass internal displacements (Deane 2016; Tamil Guardian 2021; PEARL 2022). Conflict-affected communities, particularly in the northern and eastern provinces, experienced the loss of land, productive assets, and access to essential services (Pinto-Jayawardena 2010; UNTFHS 2017). These conditions created severe vulnerabilities, undermining long-term development, reconciliation, and the re-establishment of social cohesion. Crucially, many victims of past abuses continue to await truth, justice, and redress (HRC 2022).

Sri Lanka's ongoing political and economic crises cannot be divorced from its historical failures to uphold human rights and to address the structural risks to human security. The absence of accountability for wartime atrocities and the exclusion of human security from national policy frameworks have contributed to the present instability. The current political moment underscores the indivisibility of human rights and human security, particularly in post-conflict societies (HRC 2022, 1). As Lautensach and Lautensach (2020) argue, while the centrality of human rights in promoting human security is now widely acknowledged, strategies for integrating the two remain complex, context-specific, and culturally sensitive, especially in multi-ethnic and pluralistic societies such as Sri Lanka.

The human security framework, first articulated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP 1994), was designed to expand narrow definitions of security by focusing on the protection of individuals rather than states. It identifies "freedom from fear" and "freedom from want" as the twin pillars of human security, corresponding

respectively to protection from violent conflict and from economic and social deprivation (CHS 2000, 1–2). This broader approach provides both the analytical and practical tools to address the vulnerabilities faced by marginalised populations, particularly when state institutions have failed to deliver justice or basic services (Sharpe et al. 2020).

In the Sri Lankan context, the failure to engage with human security risks has led to growing social and political discontent. As Ranaweera (2023) notes, the accumulation of unaddressed grievances and structural injustices increases the likelihood of collective frustration, which can manifest in social unrest or violence. Trends in recent years suggest that the erosion of democratic institutions, worsening human rights conditions, and widespread impunity are contributing to a deteriorating security environment, posing significant obstacles to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda (HRC 2021a).

Against this backdrop, this article examines the most pressing threats to human security in post-war Sri Lanka. Through this analysis, it seeks to identify policy and governance reforms that can address underlying human rights challenges and foster a more inclusive and resilient peace.

Rationale for the Study

The concept of human security has emerged as a comprehensive framework for addressing the multiple and interrelated threats that undermine the safety and dignity of individuals. Although the term itself is relatively recent, its foundations lie in a long tradition of humanitarian and rights-based thought, from the establishment of the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1864 to the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Conventions in 1949. At its core, human security shifts the focus of security discourse from the protection of states to the protection of individuals. It posits that for people to be truly secure, they must be free from persistent threats, both violent and non-violent, that endanger their physical, economic, and psychological well-being (Bruderlein 2000).

This multidimensional perspective is especially relevant to Sri Lanka, a country grappling with a legacy of violent conflict, economic collapse, and deeply rooted social divisions. Human security offers a people-centred and prevention-oriented approach that encompasses economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security (Hans et al. 2019). It recognises that development, peace, human rights, and security are interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable stability.

This perspective is echoed in the words of former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan: “We will not enjoy security without development. We will not enjoy development without security. And we will not enjoy either without respect for human rights” (UN 2005, 2). Similarly, Nelson Mandela (1993, para. 26) affirmed that “we do not want

“freedom without bread, nor do we want bread without freedom,” capturing the inextricable link between material well-being and political freedom.

In post-war Sri Lanka, the failure to address the root causes of human insecurity, particularly unresolved grievances related to ethnic, religious, and linguistic marginalisation, has hindered national reconciliation and undermined trust in state institutions (Deane 2023). Without meaningful engagement and mechanisms for redress, these grievances risk being recycled into future cycles of instability and violence (Lautensach and Lautensach 2020, 549–550). Promoting human rights, therefore, is not only a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for pre-empting threats to human security (Lautensach and Lautensach 2020, 452).

This study adopts the human security framework as both a diagnostic and policy-oriented tool. It enables a broader and more inclusive understanding of security, one that goes beyond traditional state-centric models and recognises the urgent need to address the vulnerabilities of marginalised and conflict-affected communities. By identifying risks and proposing preventive measures, this approach aims to support Sri Lanka’s efforts to foster a more stable, equitable, and secure future.

Review of Literature

Much of the literature reviewed highlights the crucial process of post-settlement peacebuilding in a deeply divided society like Sri Lanka. A human security approach is identified as “important to addressing underlying causes of conflict, which are of primary concern for conflict transformation, and directs attention to the sustained prevention of violence” (Hans et al. 2019, 89). The continued tensions between different ethnicities, fuelled by intolerance, suspicions, mutual mistrust, and the deteriorating human rights situation in the country, seriously threaten political power sharing, which is a foundation of post-war reconciliation and reconstruction. While the factors contributing to the volatility and crisis in the country are wide-ranging, including issues such as land disputes (Korf and Lavadenz 2007) and environmental challenges (Lokupitiya 2004, 115), this discussion focuses on those foundational to sustainable human security.

The author’s prior work has detailed various methods for achieving transitional justice, peace, and accountability (Deane 2016; Deane 2023). Building on this foundation, the current analysis broadens the scope by examining additional critical factors such as human rights violations and the ongoing economic crisis, as well as emblematic cases illustrating these challenges. These elements are essential to understanding sustainable human security because, without effectively transforming root grievances into dialogue and constructive engagement, communities risk harbouring unresolved tensions that may seed further cycles of violence (Lautensach and Lautensach 2020, 549–50). Indeed, negative trends emerging in 2021 and 2022 have significantly altered the environment for reconciliation, accountability, and human rights in Sri Lanka.

Threats to Human Security

The Economic Crisis

One of the most pressing threats to human security is the ongoing economic crisis. Sri Lanka was already vulnerable due to persistent fiscal and current account deficits, rising external debt, and shocks such as the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks and the COVID-19 pandemic (HRC 2022). Compounding these vulnerabilities were policy decisions that worsened the situation, including a controversial tax cut and a ban on chemical fertiliser imports in April 2021, which deeply impacted agricultural productivity and food security (WFP 2023).

Since late 2021, the population has endured acute shortages of food, fuel, and medicines, alongside hyperinflation and prolonged electricity blackouts. By April 2022, Sri Lanka had exhausted its foreign exchange reserves and defaulted on US\$51 billion of foreign debt (UNHCR 2022). The economy contracted sharply by 7.8 per cent in 2022 and a further 11.5 per cent in the first quarter of 2023. Poverty rates doubled from 13.1 to 25 per cent between 2021 and 2022, adding approximately 2.5 million people to the ranks of the poor, with projections of further increases in 2023 (World Bank 2023b). The United Nations estimated that nearly 5.7 million citizens required immediate humanitarian assistance in mid-2022 (UN News 2022).

Food insecurity has been especially acute, with inflation soaring to around 81 per cent since July 2022, driving higher food prices, rising costs of imported commodities, reduced incomes, and below-average crop production. Surveys indicated that four out of five people have been skipping meals, and up to 70 per cent of households reduced their food consumption (UN 2022a). The crisis has also severely impaired the right to health, work, and education (World Bank 2023b). Essential medicines and medical supplies were in short supply at many primary care facilities, including life-saving drugs and equipment for maternal health (UNICEF 2021; HRC 2022). These disruptions are expected to have long-term effects on malnutrition and public health outcomes.

The combined effect of these economic shocks has devastated living standards, disproportionately impacting the poor and vulnerable, and eroding decades of development gains (World Bank 2023b). A significant learning crisis persists, with only 14 per cent of Grade Three students meeting minimum literacy competency and 15 per cent in numeracy. Despite ongoing negotiations for an IMF bailout, the scale of the crisis demands comprehensive reforms with robust social protections for vulnerable populations.

In response to this crisis, Sri Lanka experienced historic mass protests that vividly underscored the indivisibility of rights and human security. For the first time, people from diverse socioeconomic, cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds united to demand political and democratic reforms, along with accountability for economic mismanagement and corruption (UNHCR 2022). These protests eventually led to the

resignation and temporary exile of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on 14 July 2022; he later returned on 2 September.

The election of President Ranil Wickremesinghe by Parliament on 20 July 2022 marked a new chapter, though his administration has taken a hardline approach towards protesters. Early actions included the detention of three student leaders under the controversial PTA on 18 August 2022 (Al Jazeera 2022), despite the government's earlier announcement of a de facto moratorium on the PTA since March 2022 (UNHCR 2022). Security forces employed excessive force to clear protest camps and suppress peaceful demonstrations, and numerous protest and trade union leaders were arrested, with many later granted bail (HRC 2022). Nevertheless, government assurances have been met with widespread distrust.

Additionally, Wickremesinghe declared a nationwide state of emergency with expanded emergency regulations, which remained in force until 18 August 2022 (Emergency Regulations No. 1 of 2022; Gazette Extraordinary No. 2289/07). These draconian measures have contributed to ongoing political fragility and raised the risk of further instability (UNHCR 2022).

Paradoxically, Wickremesinghe's early rhetoric diverged sharply from his restrictive actions. In his first parliamentary address on 3 August 2022, he called for unity across ethnic communities and respect for all religions, languages, and traditions (*Business Today* 2022). He acknowledged the transformative power of the protest movement, particularly the role of youth, and promised constitutional reforms, including the creation of a "People's Assembly" to guide political and social change (HRC 2022). Furthermore, he pledged to fight corruption and establish a Social Justice Commission to ensure equitable benefits from economic reforms.

Despite these pledges, concrete reforms have yet to materialise. Achieving meaningful change requires a decisive break from the past and the dismantling of authoritarian practices that curtail freedoms of speech, assembly, and other fundamental human rights.

The Culture of Impunity

Impunity remains the fundamental obstacle to Sri Lanka's sustainable peace, development, rule of law, reconciliation, and human security. This persistent impunity has fostered a breeding ground for corruption and the abuse of power, emboldening those responsible for human rights violations (UNHCR 2022). Notably, a recent UN report has explicitly linked the island nation's economic collapse to the ongoing impunity for past and present human rights abuses, economic crimes, and corruption (HRC 2022). This marks the first time an international body has directly associated Sri Lanka's economic crisis with gross human rights violations.

More than 14 years after the war ended, the government has repeatedly failed to implement an effective transitional justice process or uphold victims' rights to truth,

justice, and reparations (Deane 2016; Deane 2023). Successive administrations have instead created political obstacles to accountability, incorporating military and former paramilitary officials credibly implicated in alleged war crimes into high government positions, while failing to promote a shared understanding of the conflict and its root causes (UNHCR 2022). The UN human rights body has adopted several resolutions demanding accountability for war crimes committed by both government forces and the LTTE (HRC 2019).

Since 2015, Sri Lanka has taken some important steps towards political and social change, including reinforcing the central role of parliament and establishing independent oversight commissions (Deane 2016; Deane 2023). The adoption of the 19th Constitutional Amendment in April 2015 was particularly significant, as it enhanced the independence of key institutions and introduced checks and balances on executive power. However, these gains were severely tested by the political turmoil of 2018 and the Easter Sunday terrorist attacks in April 2019, which killed 277 people and injured 592 others (HRC 2022). The attacks triggered communal violence against the Muslim minority and prompted a reversion to draconian measures, including a state of emergency, emergency regulations, and increased military deployment.¹

Moreover, the economic and social fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing tensions, social disparities, marginalisation, and discrimination experienced by minorities, further impacting religious freedom (WHO 2020; Marsoof 2022). The Muslim community in Sri Lanka was particularly targeted both during the pandemic and in the aftermath of the Easter attacks (OHCHR 2021). Some government policies disproportionately affected religious minorities; for example, the mandated cremation of all COVID-19 victims prevented Muslims from practising their burial rites, intensifying community distress and tensions (UNHCR 2020).

Contrary to the government's declared commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Tamil and Muslim minorities remain marginalised and excluded from national vision statements and policy frameworks (HRC 2021a; HRC 2021b). Senior government officials, including the president, have continued to employ ethno-nationalistic and majoritarian rhetoric, shaping policies that primarily serve the interests of the Sinhala Buddhist majority without adequate regard for minority communities (Presidential Secretariat 2020). This exclusionary discourse has serious repercussions for reconciliation, peacebuilding, religious tolerance, and inclusion, fostering division and polarisation that threaten future stability and undermine human security for all (OHCHR 2021).

The erosion of democratic safeguards accelerated with the passing of the 20th Amendment to the Constitution on 22 October 2020, which reversed many gains secured by the 19th Amendment. This amendment expanded presidential and executive

1 That has been regularly extended by the Gazette by virtue of Section 12 of the Public Security Ordinance.

powers, undermining the independence of key institutions such as the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSSL), the Election Commission, the National Police Commission, and the judiciary (HRC 2022; OHCHR 2021).

Two of the four transitional justice mechanisms established, the Office on Missing Persons (OMP) and the Office for Reparations, have failed to fulfil their mandates (Grewal 2023). For example, despite issuing 1,341 “Certificates of Absence” to families of the disappeared as of August 2022 (HRC 2022), the OMP has been ineffective in tracing missing persons or clarifying their fates in any meaningful way (CPA 2015). It has also neglected to investigate suspected mass grave sites to identify remains (HRC 2022). Although in its formation, the OMP was intended to be an independent and credible national body, its credibility has been severely compromised by problematic appointments in 2020, leading to a significant erosion of trust among victims’ families, a vital ingredient for sustainable peace, development, and security (HRC 2021a).

Sri Lanka’s history of commissions and inquiries is extensive, but none have produced effective accountability or reconciliation outcomes (OHCHR 2021). Since 2009, multiple commissions, including the 2006 Presidential Commission of Inquiry (the “Udalagama Commission”), the 2011 Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission, and the 2013 Presidential Commission on Abductions and Disappearances (the “Paranagama Commission”), have produced detailed reports and recommendations (Law and Society 2020; Amnesty International 2009), but implementation has consistently failed. Most recently, in January 2021, a new three-member Commission of Inquiry was appointed to review past findings, and while a synopsis of its draft final report was submitted to President Wickremesinghe in February 2023 (Presidential Secretariat 2023), the report remains unpublished and its recommendations unacted upon (HRW 2023). These repeated failures have cemented a culture of impunity that continues to undermine human security.

In 2023, the Sri Lankan government proposed yet another National Unity and Reconciliation Commission. However, this latest initiative has been widely criticised as incapable of fostering genuine confidence or creating a safe and secure environment for all Sri Lankans. Crucially, there has been no meaningful consultation with affected communities (HRW 2023). Furthermore, given the repeated failures of past commissions and tribunals, alongside the persistent neglect of numerous unimplemented recommendations, establishing yet another commission risks repeating the same mistakes and causing further trauma without any realistic chance of a different outcome (HRW 2023).

Impunity remains deeply entrenched through political obstruction of accountability for human rights violations (HRC 2021a). Sri Lanka’s criminal justice system has systematically hindered justice for victims of rights abuses. Over the past two decades, most human rights violations have not been properly investigated or prosecuted in court (Amnesty International 2009). Among the few cases that reach trial, convictions are

rare, witnesses often refuse to testify, and hearings are frequently delayed (HRC 2021a). In some instances, prosecutors have failed to appear in court altogether (Collure and Selvanayagam 1997), while acquittals on appeal and presidential pardons have reversed convictions. A notable example is Staff Sergeant Sunil Ratnayake, convicted in 2019 for the murder of eight Tamil civilians, including four children, in Mirusuvil in 2000. Despite the Supreme Court affirming his conviction, he was granted a presidential pardon in March 2020 (HRC 2022), marking a significant setback in the pursuit of justice (ITJP 2022).²

Sri Lanka's criminal justice system has long been subject to interference by state agents who have sought to obstruct justice by bribing, threatening, harassing, intimidating, and even murdering witnesses to discourage police investigations and mislead the public (AHRC 2009). Alarmingly, the current government has actively obstructed ongoing investigations and criminal trials. For instance, the Presidential Commission of Inquiry to Investigate Allegations of Political Victimization interfered with police and court processes in several high-profile human rights cases (Amnesty International 2021; CPA 2022; 2021) and “investigated” corruption cases related to incidents between 2005 and 2015, severely undermining the independence of the police and judiciary. The government has also blocked investigations and prosecutions in emblematic human rights cases, overturned murder convictions, reinstated security force members disciplined for serious misconduct (Gazette No. 2157/44 of 9 January 2020), and shielded members of the Rajapaksa family and others from inquiries into fraud and money laundering (HRW 2021). Between 2020 and 2022, many corruption and economic crime cases were discontinued (TISL 2022).

Impunity in Emblematic Cases

The investigation and prosecution of emblematic cases are essential to dismantling the culture of impunity and advancing accountability. Yet, the persistent lack of progress in these cases starkly reveals the government's ongoing unwillingness or inability to hold perpetrators accountable, particularly when state agents are implicated. These emblematic cases highlight systemic failures within Sri Lanka's criminal justice system, underscoring multiple barriers that obstruct victims' access to justice and ultimately undermine the pursuit of truth, justice, and sustainable human security (Fonseka 2023). In many instances, victims and their families have endured prolonged waits, spanning years, without meaningful advances at either the investigative or prosecutorial stages. Furthermore, where cases have been concluded, justice has often been illusory, with accused individuals acquitted or released despite credible evidence.

A few rare exceptions do exist. The 2006 gang rape and murder of Krishanthi Kumaraswamy, alongside the murders of her mother, brother, and neighbour who sought to find her, resulted in several military personnel being convicted (*Somaratne*

2 Fundamental rights applications are presently before the Supreme Court challenging the presidential pardon in this matter (SC FR 105 and 101/2020).

Rajapakse and others v Hon Attorney General 2010; Jayawardena and Pinto-Jayawardena 2016). This case remains a significant, albeit exceptional, example of successful prosecution in the face of entrenched impunity.

Similarly, the *Embilipitiya* case stands out as a particularly notable instance of state accountability. In this case, the enforced disappearance and murder of 48 schoolboys between 1989 and 1990 during a particularly violent period in Sri Lanka's history led to convictions of perpetrators, an outcome not commonly achieved given the widespread pattern of disappearances at the time (Fonseka 2023, 191–218). However, the broader trend remains deeply troubling, as demonstrated by the *Vishvamadu* case. Despite four soldiers being convicted of gang rape and sexual assault in this case (*P. Shantha Subasinghe and Others v Hon. Attorney General* 2015), they were subsequently acquitted by the Court of Appeal (Medewatte et al. 2022). This acquittal exemplifies the pervasive climate of impunity that continues to undermine victims' pursuit of justice (ACHR 2005).

Other emblematic instances of impunity include the government's unwillingness to investigate or establish the truth surrounding the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings, which killed 277 people, and other egregious human rights violations, such as the 2006 killings of 17 humanitarian workers in Muttur (ACF International, 2013), the 2009 assassination of journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge, a vocal government critic, and the enforced disappearance of journalist Prageeth Eknaligoda in 2010 (Kodikara 2023). The killing of protesters by army personnel during demonstrations in Weliwerya in 2013, and the anti-Muslim riots in Aluthgama (2014) and Digana (2018), similarly remain unresolved with little accountability.

The government's actions in mid-2023 further underscored its entrenched commitment to protecting suspected perpetrators. For example, retired Admiral Ravindra Wijegunaratne was appointed as Sri Lanka's High Commissioner to Pakistan despite a pending court order for his arrest in connection with the notorious Navy 11 case, in which victims were abducted for ransom, tortured, and murdered (Amnesty International 2021). This appointment effectively shields him from prosecution and signals a clear disregard for accountability.

Similarly, the Attorney General's Department declined to proceed with charges against former Navy commander Wasantha Karannagoda, the 14th suspect named in the forced disappearance and murder of the Navy 11 between 2008 and 2009. These youths were reportedly held in navy bases before being killed. The failure to prosecute those reasonably suspected of criminal responsibility for such egregious crimes under international law represents a grave setback and deepens the victims' families' sense of injustice (Amnesty International 2021). Although relatives of the disappeared have filed a writ petition seeking to nullify the decision to drop charges against Karannagoda, the Court of Appeal dismissed the petition, deferring to the Attorney General's

prosecutorial discretion (CPA 2022; 2021). This decision is currently under challenge, but it exemplifies the judicial deference that continues to hinder accountability.

In addition, the Attorney General's Department recently informed the Jaffna Magistrate Court that it would cease criminal proceedings against six suspects implicated in the 2000 murder of journalist Mylvaganam Nimalarajan, resulting in their release despite credible evidence (CPA 2022; 2021). Similarly, in March 2022, former Finance Minister Basil Rajapaksa and three others were acquitted of misappropriation charges related to Divineguma funds, following instructions from the Attorney General (Ranasinghe 2022). Basil Rajapaksa was also acquitted of misappropriation related to the construction of a mansion in Malwana (Farzan 2022). These cases exemplify how political influence and institutional weaknesses perpetuate impunity and severely undermine public confidence in the justice system.

Such entrenched impunity creates a profoundly hostile environment for any credible truth-seeking or reconciliation process. When marginalised and discriminated communities are deprived of justice, and when perpetrators, including high-level political and military figures, are shielded from accountability, trust in state institutions erodes. This climate dissuades victims and witnesses from engaging openly and safely in transitional justice mechanisms (HRW 2023). The sustained denial of justice deepens societal divisions and hampers efforts to build sustainable peace and human security in Sri Lanka.

Findings

Post-war Sri Lanka continues to grapple with profound and interconnected threats to human security, rooted in the unresolved legacies of conflict and exacerbated by ongoing political, economic, and social crises. This study found that these multidimensional challenges, ranging from civil unrest and economic instability to weakened rule of law and institutional legitimacy, collectively undermine not only individual well-being but also the broader framework necessary for sustainable peace and development. Recent UN-commissioned findings show the use of the PTA increased from 38 cases in 2024 to 49 in the first five months of 2025; the report also documents multiple deaths in custody and widespread harassment of civil society actors (HRW 2025).

A key finding is that the entrenched culture of impunity surrounding human rights violations remains a core obstacle to human security. Despite periodic government initiatives and international pressure to address past abuses, efforts towards accountability have largely been symbolic and ineffective. The persistent failure to prosecute perpetrators meaningfully, coupled with high-profile instances of pardons and political interference, highlights systemic weaknesses in Sri Lanka's transitional justice mechanisms. This impunity perpetuates social grievances, erodes public trust in state institutions, and fundamentally compromises the possibility of genuine reconciliation and long-term stability.

The enduring marginalisation of ethnic and religious minorities, particularly Tamil and Muslim communities, further exacerbates insecurities and deepens social fragmentation. Government policies and rhetoric that prioritise majoritarian interests reflect a failure to integrate minority concerns into the national vision, undermining inclusive governance and fuelling cycles of exclusion and potential violence. The recent mass protests triggered by economic mismanagement and political corruption exemplify a broad societal demand for democratic reforms, accountability, and human rights protections across diverse communities. These protests underscore the urgent need for governance that respects civil liberties, promotes participation, and safeguards fundamental freedoms.

This article's findings align with the objective of advancing a holistic understanding of human security in post-conflict Sri Lanka, emphasising that security cannot be achieved through militarised or regime-centric approaches alone. Instead, sustainable peacebuilding requires a fundamental reorientation towards people-centred governance, one that prioritises human rights, social justice, and inclusive political processes. This entails repealing draconian laws, protecting the right to peaceful protest, and implementing comprehensive security sector reforms that rebuild trust between citizens and the state.

Ultimately, addressing the structural roots of Sri Lanka's crises, namely impunity, corruption, and exclusion, is critical to restoring human security and legitimacy. Such transformative change is not only necessary for national stability but also essential for enhancing Sri Lanka's standing within the international human rights community. By centring human security in policy and practice, Sri Lanka can move beyond cycles of conflict and crisis towards a more just, secure, and inclusive future.

Recommendations

The prolonged period of impunity, widespread human rights abuses, systemic discrimination, and entrenched violence have profoundly undermined the fundamental freedoms and basic human rights of Sri Lanka's population. To effectively strengthen human security, it is imperative that the government prioritise human rights as the cornerstone of all security policies and practices. Creating a political and social environment where individuals can pursue happiness, freedom, and prosperity, grounded in the principles of mutual respect, equality, and dignity, must be a central objective. This requires mainstreaming human rights into all governmental mechanisms, strategies, and initiatives aimed at improving public security, delivering truth, ensuring justice, providing reparations, and enacting institutional reforms (Lautensach and Lautensach 2020, 459).

Achieving this transformation necessitates a multifaceted approach, including but not limited to: recognising and addressing the systemic discrimination faced by Tamil and other minority communities; dismantling institutional barriers that deny these communities equal protection under the law; and immediately ending all forms of

intimidation, harassment, and reprisals against conflict-affected individuals, human rights defenders, and activists perpetrated by state agencies (HRW 2023). The government must also release all political prisoners detained under the PTA and fully investigate, with the active involvement of international bodies, the many enforced disappearances and mass graves that remain unresolved. Adopting a holistic, comprehensive, and victim-centred transitional justice framework (Amnesty International 2019), along with a transparent plan and timeline to implement recommendations from previous commissions of inquiry, is essential. Furthermore, the government must disclose the findings of inquiries into the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings to foster accountability and public trust.

To fulfil its obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law, Sri Lanka must rigorously prosecute those suspected of crimes under international law and gross human rights violations. Upholding the rule of law is indispensable for rebuilding trust, fostering peace, and facilitating national unity. The government should cease all interference in judicial processes and expedite trials in emblematic cases involving enforced disappearances, unlawful killings, and mass graves (France 24 2023; Jeyaraj 2019). Crucially, the state must refrain from granting pardons or any form of clemency to perpetrators found guilty of serious human rights violations. Strengthening the independence and capacity of the judiciary, the criminal justice system, and oversight institutions is fundamental to sustainable development and security. Without comprehensive structural, constitutional, and political reforms that reinforce democratic checks and balances, these recommendations risk remaining rhetorical rather than transformational. As the United Nations human rights office recently stated, Sri Lanka now has a “historic opportunity” to end impunity and deliver justice, emphasising the need for a comprehensive roadmap of reforms (OHCHR 2025).

Moreover, the Sri Lankan government must address the ongoing human rights violations linked to the militarisation of the northern and eastern provinces, including the unlawful confiscation of land and property and the suppression of freedoms of expression and association (HRW 2023). Development initiatives in these regions must be grounded in principles of inclusion, non-discrimination, and respect for local communities’ rights, aligning with the broader objectives of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

Collectively, these reforms will enhance Sri Lanka’s credibility both domestically and internationally, foster confidence-building among diverse communities, and lay a vital foundation for achieving durable human security. They represent not only legal and moral imperatives but also strategic necessities for the country’s long-term peace and stability.

These recommendations gain further urgency in light of recent international developments. In March 2025, the United Kingdom imposed targeted sanctions on four Sri Lankan individuals, including three former senior military commanders and one ex-

LTTE leader, citing their alleged involvement in serious human rights violations during the civil war. These sanctions include asset freezes and travel bans under the UK's Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime (Reuters 2025a). Similarly, a United Nations human rights report released in August 2025 highlighted ongoing systemic violations in Sri Lanka, including arbitrary arrests, misuse of anti-terror laws, and deaths in custody, particularly affecting Tamil and Muslim communities in the North and East (HRW 2025). These developments demonstrate that the challenges to human security in Sri Lanka are far from resolved, and they reaffirm the international community's continued scrutiny. If meaningful and timely reforms are not implemented, especially in relation to truth, justice, and institutional accountability, Sri Lanka risks deepening its legitimacy crisis, further alienating affected communities, and isolating itself on the global stage.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka's prolonged struggle with separatist tensions, compounded by persistent failures to uphold sustainable human security, has left the country perpetually on the brink of crisis. The devastating economic collapse of 2022 is not an isolated event but rather the culmination of decades of entrenched corruption, systemic impunity, and a consistent failure to deliver accountability and justice. This crisis starkly underscores the indivisibility of human rights and the profound interconnection between economic stability, political governance, and human security.

Addressing this multifaceted crisis demands confronting the underlying structural factors that have perpetuated insecurity. Central to this is dismantling the culture of impunity for past and ongoing human rights abuses and holding accountable those responsible, especially individuals in positions of power implicated in economic crimes and corruption. The entrenched abuse of authority and lack of accountability have created fertile ground for repeated violations and systemic dysfunction.

Importantly, the broad-based demands for accountability and democratic reforms articulated by diverse Sri Lankan communities represent a critical juncture and opportunity for a reimagined, inclusive national vision. This moment calls for a new national dialogue grounded in principles of democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights.

To achieve sustainable human security, fundamental and transformative changes are essential. The government must engage meaningfully and inclusively with all citizens to address the political and systemic root causes that have long fuelled discrimination and undermined rights. Only through such participatory and comprehensive reforms can Sri Lanka hope to build a just, peaceful, and secure future for all its people.

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