

Unearthing the truth in Chemmani: UN High Commissioner calls for investigation by independent forensic experts to ensure accountability

Jaffna, June 26, 2025

A delegation led by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk visited the Chemmani mass grave site and the adjacent vigil in Jaffna yesterday. At the site, he was received by Senior Counsel K.S. Ratnavale and Attorneys Ranitha Gnanarajah and V.S. Niranjan, who represent the victim families and provided a detailed account of the site’s background, the ongoing excavation, court proceedings, and the challenges confronting the investigation.



After visiting the site and meeting with families, the High Commissioner addressed the media, calling for a thorough and independent investigation led by qualified forensic experts capable of uncovering the truth and delivering long-overdue closure to the families of the disappeared. He emphasized that this process is a vital step toward accountability, justice, and healing from the deep and ongoing pain caused by these unresolved tragedies.

At a press conference following the visit, Senior Counsel K.S. Ratnavale clarified that it was the lawyers representing the aggrieved parties—not the government—who filed the necessary application in the Jaffna Magistrate’s Court that enabled the High Commissioner’s lawful access to the Chemmani mass grave site. He criticized the government’s claim that the High Commissioner was ‘free to visit any location,’ pointing out that the site was under court jurisdiction and no official clearance had been arranged. The legal team obtained court permission at the last moment, without which the visit would not have been legally possible. Mr. Ratnavale described the government’s statements as misleading and lacking genuine commitment to transparency or accountability.

Further, Senior Counsel, K.S. Ratnavale, outlined the following three core concerns regarding the Chemmani investigation that was put forward to the High Commissioner:

1. Uninterrupted and adequate government funding must be guaranteed to ensure the excavation continues until completion. Any delay or withdrawal of funds risks derailing the process and denying families the truth they have waited decades for.
2. A fully equipped forensic laboratory in Jaffna must be established to handle the examination of skeletal remains locally. The current need to transport remains to Colombo or Karapitiya creates risks of tampering and breaches in the chain of custody. A dedicated, modern facility in the North is critical to preserving forensic integrity.
3. International monitoring of the excavation is essential to ensure transparency, credibility, and adherence to international best practices. Given Sri Lanka’s history of stalled or compromised investigations, independent oversight is necessary to protect evidence and public trust.

The Chemmani site—uncovered in February during crematorium construction near the Sindhubath cremation grounds—lies adjacent to the original Chemmani mass graves from the late 1990s, long linked to enforced disappearances during Sri Lanka’s civil war. In May, an application filed by the lawyers in the Jaffna Magistrate’s Court secured court orders authorizing supervised excavation at the site. The excavation is being led by archaeologist Prof. Raj Somadeva, with Judicial Medical Officer Dr. S. Piranavan overseeing forensic procedures. The court also mandated police protection and regular reporting to ensure transparency. On June 2, court proceedings confirmed that the number of remains recovered met the legal criteria for a

mass grave, prompting expectations of formal legal action. As of June 25, a total of 19 bodies had been exhumed from five of the 18 identified excavation grids. Magistrate A.A. Ananadarajah granted a 45-day extension to complete the forensic analysis.

During his visit, the High Commissioner also met with families at a protest encampment near the site, where Tamil families and youth have maintained a continuous vigil since June 23, symbolized by the burning of an 'anaiya vilakku' (unquenchable flame). He offered his respects to the victims and assured families that their voices would be heard internationally and that their calls for truth and justice would remain central to the UN Human Rights Office's mandate.

The visit came just two days after the High Commissioner's June 24 address in Colombo, where he warned of Sri Lanka's deepening 'impunity trap' and urged the government to deliver justice for the victims of the most serious crimes. He cautioned that the absence of justice would undermine the stability of peace, while acknowledging the truth could open the door to justice, reparations, and ultimately, healing.

Earlier that day, High Commissioner Volker Türk also visited Trincomalee, where he met with Tamil families of the disappeared, civil society actors, and survivors of human rights violations. Protesters submitted a memorandum demanding justice, including calls for Sri Lanka's referral to the International Criminal Court, the involvement of international forensic experts in investigating mass graves, and accountability for ongoing land grabs and militarization. Survivors spoke of settler colonization, surveillance, and state violence, underscoring the urgent need for sustained international scrutiny.

As of now, the Sri Lankan government has issued no public response to the Chemmani findings or the High Commissioner Volker Türk's visit, who cautioned that the absence of justice would undermine the stability of peace, while acknowledging the truth could open the door to justice, reparations, and ultimately, healing. Whether Chemmani becomes another buried truth or a turning point in Sri Lanka's reckoning remains to be seen.