

## THE ICRC HOSTS THE 2ND NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR FAMILIES OF MISSING PERSONS IN SRI LANKA

AUGUST 2025



The 2nd National Conference for Families of Missing Persons in Sri Lanka took place on 25–27 June 2025 in Colombo. Facilitated by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the conference brought together 62 representatives of families of missing persons from all communities and diverse regions in Sri Lanka.

The conference provided a neutral humanitarian space for families of the missing to exchange views and discuss common issues and challenges faced in the continuing search for their missing loved ones and how to overcome them collectively. The families' need to know what happened to their missing loved ones or their whereabouts was reiterated throughout the conference by the participants.

The conference also served as a forum for families to engage in direct dialogue with the authorities concerned on improving existing processes and mechanisms available in Sri Lanka to address their multifaceted needs. Speaking to them, Minister of Justice and National Integration Harshana Nanayakkara highlighted the importance of justice, acknowledgement and economic and psychosocial support for the families of the missing, while officials from the Office on Missing Persons responded to questions from the families. A presentation on the use of the certificate of absence was also delivered by the representatives from the Registrar General's Department. Further, the families engaged in a dialogue with members of the international community.

The findings from a recently concluded review conducted by the ICRC on the needs and expectations of families of missing persons in Sri Lanka was shared with the participating families, representatives of the international community and civil society organizations. The conference also included a panel discussion with two psychologists specializing in dealing with ambiguous loss or "frozen grief".

Representatives of the families of the missing emphasized the importance of acknowledging their suffering and their need for answers, while drawing attention to the necessity for comprehensive support from authorities.

The conference was conceptualized in consultation with families of missing persons from the east, north and south of Sri Lanka, reflecting their priorities. The first edition of the conference was held in December 2024.

## WORLD RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT DAY 2025



The ICRC, together with the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society (SLRCS), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and volunteers marked World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day on 8 May 2025. This year's theme, "On the Side of Humanity", is closely linked to the overarching principle of humanity that motivates the work of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

To commemorate the day, the SLRCS in Colombo hosted a special ceremony to appreciate outstanding volunteers from each of the 25 district-level branches, honouring their commitment to humanitarianism. The event celebrated their courage, selflessness and unwavering service, especially during disasters and emergencies, reflecting the true spirit of the Movement. Concurrently, all 25 branches of the SLRCS commemorated the day by engaging youth across the country through the Red Cross Junior Circles in schools, and organizing essay and art competitions that encouraged creative expression of humanitarian themes and inspired their active participation in humanitarian service.

## SLRCS VOLUNTEERS TRAINED IN DEALING WITH AMBIGUOUS LOSS



On 3 April 2025, volunteer tracing coordinators (VTCs) and trainers from seven northern and eastern districts gathered for a one-day refresher training workshop focused on Restoring Family Links (RFL). Organized by the SLRCS with technical and financial support from the ICRC, the workshop focused on the processes of data collection, storage and usage within RFL programmes, emphasizing individuals' right to access and control their personal information. The discussions aimed to better equip volunteers to safeguard the confidentiality and dignity of those seeking support for tracing their loved ones.

The training also marked the first formal introduction of the concept of ambiguous loss or "frozen grief" to the volunteers. They actively participated in conversations on how to better support individuals coping with emotional and psychological uncertainty.

This initiative marks another step in the continued commitment of both the SLRCS and the ICRC towards improving the quality of the humanitarian response and psychosocial support provided to the families of missing persons affected by conflict, migration and disaster.



## THE ICRC TRAINS IN DATA COLLECTION FOR MISSING PERSONS



In response to a request from the Office on Missing Persons (OMP) for technical training on the collection of missing persons data, the ICRC conducted two workshops in May and June 2025. Participants reflected on the importance of preliminary investigations as part of the search and identification process of missing persons and the considerations for the collection of information on missing persons, including human resources and the skills required.

Participants were also trained in collecting antemortem data, potential gravesites and events of disappearances using dedicated questionnaires. The goal of the training workshops was to contribute to the process of clarifying fate and whereabouts of missing persons. The workshops helped OMP board members, regional coordinators, legal advisers, data officers and other heads of units to strengthen their technical knowledge on data collection.

## A PLATFORM TO DISCUSS MEDICO-LEGAL PROCESSES



In partnership with the Sri Lanka Judges' Institute (SLJI), the ICRC facilitated a workshop in June 2025 for Judicial Medical Officers (JMOs) and magistrates with the aim of creating a space for the judiciary to explore and better understand the existing medico-legal processes in Sri Lanka and the established principles of sound medico-legal practices.

The broad range of topics covered included an introduction to medico-legal services in Sri Lanka;

injury evaluation, classification and their implications; review of medico-legal reports (clinical and pathological) and Post-Mortem Redistribution; ethical dimensions of medico-legal practice; exhumation and inquest; and an overview of the role of magistrates in suspected cases of ill-treatment. Our work in Sri Lanka, including the principles related to the national mechanism on missing persons and a discussion on the role of magistrates, was also presented. This platform of exchange was launched by the ICRC in 2023.

## LIVELIHOOD SUPPORT PROGRAMME HELPS FAMILIES OF MISSING PERSONS



The livelihood support programme (LSP) implemented by the ICRC addresses the chronic socio-economic vulnerabilities of families of missing persons in Sri Lanka, allowing them to participate in the economy while strengthening their resilience.

From July 2024 to April 2025, 427 families of missing persons received support either to start or improve their livelihoods, while 419 individuals participated in basic business management skills training. To ensure

sustainability, sector-specific business management skills training and value chain development training workshops were conducted with the technical support of government departments involved, helping participants to link with markets and service provider networks in the state and in the private sector. Moreover, the recent outcome evaluation findings revealed that 37 per cent of projects which received assistance from 2020 to 2024 have successfully employed additional workforce and transitioned into micro entrepreneurship.

## ICRC RECONNECTS DISPLACED PEOPLE FROM RAKHINE STATE WITH THEIR FAMILIES



The ICRC visited a group of displaced people from Rakhine State in Myanmar for the first time in a place of detention in Mullaitivu to help reconnect them with their families abroad.

During the visit, we assessed their needs and monitored their general living conditions in the place of detention, which included 117 displaced individuals.

The ICRC collected a total of 44 short oral messages containing family news to be relayed to their

family members abroad. We also distributed hygiene items, including dental kits, sanitary items and milk powder. The observations made during the visit were shared with the authorities concerned as part of the ICRC's bilateral and confidential dialogue.

This visit marks an important step in supporting the humanitarian needs and rights of the displaced community from Rakhine State and reinforces our commitment to protect family links in detention.



## 75 YEARS OF THE GENEVA CONVENTIONS: GLOBAL AND SRI LANKAN PERSPECTIVES



On 12 August 2024 a poignant milestone was marked – the 75th anniversary of the Geneva Conventions, the cornerstone of international humanitarian law (IHL) which regulates the conduct of armed conflict to preserve humanity and reduce suffering, even in wartime. The ICRC, in partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Embassy of Switzerland to Sri Lanka and the Maldives, organized an event themed “75 Years of the Geneva Conventions: Global and Sri Lankan Perspectives” on 14 August 2024 in Colombo.

A panel discussion, “Preserving our shared humanity: IHL as a national and international political priority”, was also held with the participation of senior officials from MFA and Ministry of Defence and the Swiss ambassador to Sri Lanka, moderated by the head of the ICRC’s delegation in Sri Lanka, Severine Chappaz. The discussion focused on Sri Lanka’s achievements and best practices in implementing IHL through the National IHL Committee, international initiatives undertaken by Sri Lanka, particularly its role in the field of disarmament, the role of the armed forces in IHL integration and the

nexus between IHL, peace and reconciliation. During the event, the finalized Sinhala and Tamil translations of the Geneva Conventions were handed over to the MFA, to be officially adopted, with the aim of promoting wider knowledge of IHL.

Concurrently, a photo exhibition was unveiled at Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall (BMICH). The exhibition consisted of three parts: “Dialogues on Humanity”, in partnership with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Photo Elysée (a museum for photography in Lausanne, Switzerland) and the ICRC; a selection of photos from the ICRC’s audiovisual archives on the history of the Geneva Conventions and the protections afforded by them; and a collection of photographs illustrating Sri Lanka’s role in the promotion and development of IHL and regional cooperation. Senior officials from ministries and state institutions, representatives of the diplomatic community, representatives of the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society, members of the armed forces, leading academics and prominent members of civil society attended the event.

## COMMEMORATING THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE GENEVA CONVENTIONS IN KANDY AND JAFFNA



The ICRC, together with the Embassy of Switzerland to Sri Lanka and the Maldives, commemorated the 75th anniversary of the Geneva Conventions in Kandy and Jaffna, in partnership with the University of Peradeniya and the University of Jaffna, respectively. A panel discussion on IHL as a common heritage of states and humanity as a whole was held in Kandy, while in Jaffna the panel discussion centred on post-conflict

application of IHL and reconciliation. Each event was followed by the unveiling of the “Dialogues on Humanity” exhibition in the respective university premises. The discussions and the exhibition provided an opportunity for students, academics and civil society representatives to engage and reflect on the multidisciplinary nature and continued relevance of IHL.





## SEMINAR ON CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES OF AI AND AUTONOMOUS WEAPON SYSTEMS



The ICRC partnered with the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies (LKI) on a panel discussion titled “Artificial Intelligence (AI), Autonomous Weapon systems (AWS) and Contemporary Challenges” on 19 December 2024. Members of the panel examined the friction between new technologies of warfare and ethical responsibility, focusing on compliance with IHL principles.

During the panel discussion, Andrei Kozik, the ICRC’s regional legal adviser, highlighted new humanitarian and legal challenges posed by technological developments, while explaining the ICRC’s position on AWS and call for new rules that prohibit the use of “unpredictable” and “anti-personnel” autonomous weapon systems. Yanithra Kumaraguru, Sri Lankan coordinator for the global campaign “Stop Killer Robots”, underscored the critical role of ethics in shaping both the legal

frameworks and the development of autonomous weapons. Colonel Nalin Herath, media director and spokesperson of the Ministry of Defence and head of the Institute of National Security Studies (INSS), highlighted the transformative impact of AI on modern warfare, emphasizing its potential for operational efficiency and noting how such weapons are reshaping combat strategies. Ajith De Alwis, chief innovation officer of the National Innovation Agency (NIA) and past president of Sri Lanka Pugwash Group, addressed the dual-use nature of science, technology and innovation, particularly in the context of AWS and AI.

Diplomats, representatives of international organizations, senior officials of ministries and state agencies, military personnel, leading researchers and university students attended the event.

## NATIONAL IHL COMMITTEE MEETING HELD



The National IHL Committee held its first meeting of 2025 in January. Facilitated by the ICRC, in partnership with the legal division of the MFA, it was attended by representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Health, the Attorney General's Department, Legal Draftsman's Department and legal officers of the armed forces.

The ICRC's Andrei Kozik facilitated an introductory session, focusing on crucial issues in modern armed conflict and IHL application while emphasizing the

evolving nature of warfare. Participants examined the Global High-Level Initiative on IHL, voluntary reporting mechanisms and the ICRC's 2024 Challenges Report (International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts: Building a Culture of Compliance for IHL to Protect Humanity in Today's and Future Conflicts).

During this meeting, the National IHL Committee was able to collectively identify key areas of interest as well as specific matters related to national implementation of IHL to focus on in 2025.

## TRAINING ON MANDELA RULES FOR NEWLY RECRUITED PRISON STAFF



Following a request from the penitentiary authorities in Sri Lanka, the ICRC conducted two training sessions for 145 newly recruited prison staff, including 34 women, on 23 April 2025. The ICRC gave an overview of the ICRC's detention-related activities in general and in Sri Lanka specifically, and introduced the participants to the

Nelson Mandela Rules, the United Nation's Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. As a result of the training, the participants were able to understand the importance of protecting the rights and dignity of people deprived of their liberty.



## THE ICRC HOLDS DISCUSSION ON BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVES ON MISSING PERSONS WITH THE FAMILIES



On 3 April 2025, the ICRC held its third discussion on Buddhist perspectives on the issue of missing persons and their families. During the meeting, a number of Buddhist representatives had the opportunity to meet and listen to four family members of missing persons representing the diverse communities and regions in Sri Lanka (namely, the north and east, families of soldiers Missing in Action and those reported missing during the political unrest in the South). The families reflected

on their experiences of ambiguous loss and shared their challenges and expectations.

The Buddhist scholars also shared their ideas on how to mitigate the suffering of families, with reference to Buddhist teachings.

The event included presentations on the right to know and Ambiguous Loss by the ICRC.

## FACTS & FIGURES

1 July 2024–30 June 2025



### ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES OF MISSING PERSONS

- 3,124 families were contacted to follow up on their tracing enquiries and 17 cases of missing persons were registered.
- 156 psychosocial support sessions (66 individual sessions and 90 group sessions) were provided to 402 relatives of missing persons through accompaniers from partner organizations.
- 256 people participated in 13 MHPSS awareness-raising sessions and meetings, some of which focused on the topic of ambiguous loss.
- 427 families received livelihood assistance to earn an income.
- 250 destitute families received cash grants to cover food and other household expenses. Among these, 67 individuals received support for small-scale business projects to improve their daily food consumption.
- 419 people received basic business management skills training, enabling them to establish market linkages.

## STRENGTHENING FORENSIC CAPACITY

- 26 OMP staff participated in a training session on missing person data collection.
- 53 magistrates participated in a training session on medico-legal processes.
- 60 staff from the Department of Archaeology, Rajarata University, participated in an awareness-raising session on forensic archaeology.



## MONITORING THE CONDITIONS OF DETENTION

- 32 visits were made to 11 places of detention and the findings and recommendations were shared confidentially with prison authorities.
- 76 detainees across the country were visited individually; of these, 10 were visited for the first time.
- 37 families were provided with a travel allowance for 96 family visits to their relatives in detention.



## PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

- 45 officers participated in a two-day Military in Internal Security Operations (MISO) workshop at Security Forces Headquarters (SFHQ West), Panagoda in July, while 49 army officers participated in a two-day MISO at SFHQ (Jaffna), Palaly in March conducted by the ICRC's regional armed and security forces delegate.
- 41 tri-services officers, including the police (3) and foreign nationals (India, Bangladesh, Oman and Saudi Arabia), benefited from a lecture on emerging technologies, IHL and the ICRC's position on new technologies at the National Defence College in July.
- Feedback was provided for 12 Sri Lanka Army IHL instructors' regimental training courses conducted for 917 non-commissioned officers and 173 officers between December 2024 and June 2025.
- 223 army personnel (UN Headquarters security) to be sent to Lebanon, Central African Republic and South Sudan joined a pre-deployment briefing in June.
- 1 representative from the Sri Lanka Army attended the Senior Workshop on International Rules governing Military Operations (SWIRMO) 2024 in Baku, Azerbaijan from 6-12 October.
- 21 IHL instructors (18 from the army; 2 from navy; and 1 from air force), who were pursuing the advanced IHL training course at the Institute of Peace Support Operations Training Sri Lanka (IPSOTSL) in Kukuleganga, were introduced to the ICRC-designed IHL training package in October.
- 330 army personnel (Combat Convoy Contingent) to be sent to Lebanon (UNIFIL) benefited from a pre-deployment briefing conducted at IPSOTSL in January.
- A two-day seminar was organized for 141 army, navy and air force officers including representatives of Rwanda (1), Maldives (1), India (3), Bangladesh (3), Pakistan (1), Oman (3), China (1), Nepal (1), Zambia (1) and Indonesia (1) on the introduction to IHL and international human rights law (IHRL), interplay between human rights and IHL, means and methods of warfare, and IHL and new technologies. The seminar was conducted by the ICRC's regional armed and security forces delegate at the Defence Services Command and Staff College (DSCSC) in March.
- 4 representatives from Sri Lanka and 1 legal adviser attended the 34th South Asian Training Session held in Kathmandu in December 2024.
- 1 workshop on teaching IHL was organized for law lecturers from state and private universities in January 2025.



- 1 workshop on teaching IHL was organized for law lecturers from state and private universities in January 2025.
- 1 team representing the University of Jaffna participated in the 23rd Red Cross International Humanitarian Law Moot (Asia-Pacific Region) Competition organized by the Hong Kong Red Cross Society in March 2025.
- 1 lecture introducing IHL was conducted for students of Diploma in Diplomacy and World Affairs at the Bandaranaike International Diplomatic Training Institute (BIDTI) in February 2025; 1 lecture was conducted as part of the training offered by BIDTI to newly recruited foreign service officers in May 2025.
- The head of the ICRC's delegation, networking adviser and two legal advisers from the ICRC attended online the inauguration of the certificate programme in international humanitarian law and Buddhism organized by the Centre for the Study of Human Rights (CSHR), University of Colombo in May.






## SUPPORTING SRI LANKA RED CROSS SOCIETY

- 150 volunteers were trained in disaster response and camp management techniques.
- 21 district branches from SLRCS held awareness-raising sessions on the Safer Access Framework and humanitarian principles.
- 24 district-level events received first-aid support from the SLRCS.
- 16 awareness-raising sessions on humanitarian principles and the Movement were organized for students and professionals, and at the community level.
- 6 meetings were held with the SLRCS's Restoring Family Links (RFL) unit to provide ongoing support to families of missing persons. In addition, 4 training sessions were conducted for the RFL unit on various topics, including the collection of tracing requests related to Sri Lankans involved in the Russia-Ukraine international armed conflict, procedures and guidelines for Family Links answers update, Red Cross message updates and data management.
- The ICRC facilitated the participation of the SLRCS's RFL focal point in the Regional Family Links Network Conference and the "Data Protection in Humanitarian Action" training programme held in Bangkok, Thailand.
- A national workshop and two one-day refresher training sessions on RFL for 46 VTCs and trainers were held with ICRC's technical and financial support.
- 16 Red Cross messages collected from Sri Lankan nationals detained in Ukraine were successfully delivered to their families in Sri Lanka via the SLRCS. In return, 14 Red Cross messages with replies were collected by the SLRCS and forwarded to the ICRC Central Tracing Agency bureau.

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