

ICRC Sri Lanka

4th International Conference for Families of Missing Persons: Families gather and amplify their collective voice in the search for answers



September 2026

From 11–13 November 2025, Colombo, became a hub of solidarity as the 4th International Conference for Families of Missing Persons brought together 110 families from across Sri Lanka's diverse regions, including the North, East and South. Organized by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies around the world, the conference, held in hybrid format, served as a powerful platform for families to share experiences, connect globally and amplify their collective voice in the search for answers about their missing loved ones.

This global event, held every two years, connected over 900 families of missing persons from 50 conference hubs worldwide, from Sao Paulo, Brazil, to Auckland, New Zealand, through live discussions hosted in Geneva, Switzerland. For Sri Lankan participants, the conference was not only a chance to participate in these global discussions, but also an opportunity to strengthen local connections during the three-day gathering in Colombo.

Families from Sri Lanka, alongside representatives from 14 other countries on the conference's co-design committee, issued a powerful joint declaration aimed at raising awareness about the global nature of the issue of missing persons. The statement called on governments, human rights organizations and

civil society groups to strengthen support for families of the missing, underlining the importance of improved legal and policy frameworks, inclusive search mechanisms, public awareness campaigns and memorialization efforts to address the global issue of missing persons.

The conference also featured a special art exhibition on the theme of ambiguous loss, a state of uncertainty defined by the lack of answers surrounding the loss of a loved one, which is often experienced by families of missing persons. The exhibition featured works by students of the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo, and Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan Faculty of Performing and Visual Arts, University of Jaffna. The artworks reflected the pain and uncertainty of loss, resonating deeply with families and creating a space for reflection and empathy.

The conference concluded with a resounding message: the need for answers about the fate of missing loved ones is urgent and universal. Families emphasized the importance of being at the forefront of search efforts, reminding the world that their voices and experiences are essential in addressing this shared human tragedy. Together, they continue to inspire a global movement for truth, justice and healing.

SLRCS conducts annual workshop to strengthen local family links network

The Sri Lanka Red Cross Society (SLRCS) convened its annual Restoring Family Links (RFL) workshop on 19 November 2025, bringing together a dedicated group of volunteer tracing coordinators from 18 districts across Sri Lanka. Supported both technically and financially by the ICRC, this year's workshop served as a platform to strengthen the national tracing network and enhance the skills of those dedicated to reconnecting families separated by armed conflict, migration, natural disaster or other emergencies.

Participants engaged in dynamic knowledge-sharing sessions, discussing best practices and strategies to overcome the emotional and logistical hurdles involved in tracing work. The discussions not only sharpened their technical expertise but also reinforced their capacity to provide compassionate and efficient support to affected families.

A significant portion of the workshop focused on upholding the RFL Code of Conduct of Data Protection in all RFL interventions. Volunteers were reminded of the critical importance of safeguarding personal information and maintaining the dignity and confidentiality of those they serve. Furthermore, the workshop addressed the unique challenges of RFL in disaster situations, equipping participants with tools and strategies needed to respond swiftly and effectively during emergencies.

The workshop also celebrated individual excellence, with the SLRCS management recognizing W.M.E.S. Wijepala from Kurunegala district branch of the SLRCS, as the best RFL volunteer of the year. His unwavering dedication to humanitarian work was acknowledged as an inspiration to his peers and the people he serves.



World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day 2026

The ICRC, together with the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society (SLRCS), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and National Society volunteers, commemorated World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day on 8 May 2026. The theme for this year, “United in Humanity”, reflects the Movement’s Fundamental Principles and emphasizes its commitment to providing timely humanitarian services to those in need across the world. The SLRCS headquarters in Colombo

hosted a special ceremony on the occasion to recognize 21 outstanding volunteers, honouring their commitment to humanitarian service. The event celebrated their dedication, selfless contributions, tireless efforts and the role volunteers play in building resilient and compassionate communities. All 24 SLRCS branches also commemorated the day by organizing various activities within their respective districts.



Panel discussion on global IHL initiative

The ICRC, in partnership with the Bandaranaike International Diplomatic Training Institute (BIDTI), organized a panel discussion entitled “A Call to Preserve Humanity in War: The Initiative Towards Making International Humanitarian Law a Global Priority” on 9 July 2025 in Colombo.

The event was held to promote the Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to IHL, launched by six states together with the ICRC, among national and international stakeholders. A key milestone of the event was the declaration of commitment by the Government of Sri Lanka to the global initiative.

The panel consisted of Mr Rémi Lambert, Ambassador of France to Sri Lanka, and

Mr Sandile Schalk, South African High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, representing two of the five founding member states of the initiative, and Ms Tilanie Silva, Deputy Legal Adviser, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment and Tourism and Chairperson of the National IHL Committee of Sri Lanka. The discussion was moderated by the ICRC’s regional legal advisor Andrei Kozik.

Attended by representatives of the Tri forces, diplomatic community, national authorities, academics and civil society, the event highlighted the urgent need to make international humanitarian law (IHL) and respecting the principles of humanity in war a political priority.



Workshop on international humanitarian law and humanitarian diplomacy

The ICRC's delegation in Colombo, in partnership with the Bandaranaike International Diplomatic Training Institute (BIDTI), conducted a two-day workshop on IHL and humanitarian diplomacy on 17 and 18 July 2025. The workshop addressed a wide range of themes such as the classification of conflicts, means and methods of warfare, post-conflict application of IHL, contemporary challenges in IHL and the role of diplomacy as a tool for achieving humanitarian goals. The workshop

ventured beyond standard IHL frameworks, incorporating a session on ambiguous loss led by an ICRC expert from its Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Programme.

The workshop was attended by 35 officials representing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministries of Defence, Ministry of Justice and the Tri forces, underscoring the range of influential organizations and people required for the effective implementation of IHL.



Moot court competitions on IHL

Reinforcing the long history of partnership that the ICRC shares with academia, 2025 saw the successful completion of the annual National Henry Dunant Memorial Moot Court competition and the Vernacular Moot Court competition. The University of Colombo's team emerged victors of the national competition

held from 18–19 December 2025, qualifying to represent Sri Lanka at the Regional Henry Dunant Memorial Moot Court competition to be held in Hong Kong in 2026. The competitions provide law undergraduates an opportunity to improve their understanding of the practical application of international humanitarian law.



Forensic anthropology workshop on age estimation

The 1st Forensic Anthropology Workshop on Age Estimation, organized by the ICRC in partnership with the Office on Missing Persons (OMP) and the Department of Forensic Medicine, University of Jaffna, was held on 14 and 15 October 2025. Hosted at the Department of Forensic Medicine, University of Jaffna, the workshop was designed for Judicial Medical Officers and other medical practitioners, including odontologists, anatomists and radiologists, who are involved in postmortem examination of human remains or academic research. With 21 participants, the event helped

enhance expertise in forensic anthropology, focusing on age estimation in subadult cases to address issues related to missing and unidentified deceased persons. Participants benefited from the extensive experience of the two facilitators, Dr Kelly Kaminkar from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Dr Amber M. Plemons from California State University. The initiative underscores the importance of a comprehensive and integrated approach to forensic investigations for preventing and responding to cases of missing and unidentified deceased persons.



Forensic photography training for mass graves investigations

The ICRC conducted a two-day forensic photography training at the Police College in Kalutara on 24 and 25 September 2025. Facilitated by forensic photographer Alain Wittmann, the training equipped 24 participants, including Scenes of Crime Officers, an archaeologist, a forensic doctor and a magistrate, on documenting mass graves and human remains. The programme combined

theoretical presentations, practical exercises and a simulated grave photography session at a mock site. The training enhanced participants' skills in techniques like framing, labeling and using photographic tools. The participants expressed interest in advanced courses, marking progress in strengthening the forensic capabilities for missing persons' investigations in Sri Lanka.



Marking World Mental Health Day through art and poetry on ambiguous loss

The ICRC hosted two conferences on ambiguous loss in Colombo and Batticaloa on 17 and 22 October 2025, in observance of World Mental Health Day and to raise awareness about the emotional strain experienced by families of missing persons and their efforts to cope with ambiguity and uncertainty. The events featured the launch of a poetry book with contributions from families of the missing and an art exhibition by university students exploring the concept of ambiguous loss.

The panel discussions brought together mental health practitioners, artists and families of the

missing to discuss how art can amplify underreported issues and raise societal awareness. The event also brought together over 100 participants from civil society, including religious leaders, mental health professionals and academics, encouraging dialogue on the emotional toll of not knowing what happened to a missing loved one and the critical need to provide families with answers.

Through art and conversation, the conference highlighted the need for greater understanding and support for affected families.



First multireligious forum on missing persons and their families in Sri Lanka

On 27 November 2025, the ICRC's delegation in Sri Lanka held its first multireligious forum on religious perspectives on the issue of missing persons and their families. The forum was joined by 24 religious representatives from the Buddhist, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Hindu and Islamic religious circles, academics and civil society members. The objective of the forum was to raise awareness of the pressing needs of families of missing persons and explore the role of religious leaders in supporting them.

The forum included a presentation on the ICRC's engagement with religious circles worldwide, along with insights from recent consultations on the needs of families of missing persons in Sri Lanka conducted by the delegation (2024-2025), consistent with findings from previous assessments made in 2015.

During a panel discussion on the role of religious leaders in addressing the issue of missing persons, Ven. Mahawela Rathanapala Thero emphasized the importance of an empathy-based approach, advocating for self-reflective methods and teachings that

encourage compassion and societal responsibility. Rev. Fr. Dr Ramesh Jacob highlighted the need to create spaces for families to share their pain and foster socially responsible groups to provide direct support. In addition, Dr M.A.M. Hakeem stressed the spiritual responsibility of religious leaders to advocate for truth, justice and reconciliation, while Mr P. Sachithanatham emphasized the role of religious teachings, such as impermanence and the eternal nature of the soul, in consoling affected families. Ms Deekshya Illangasinghe noted the unique influence of religious leaders in South Asia, suggesting they act as coordinators between families, authorities and civil society to provide emotional, spiritual and social support.

The participants also engaged in group discussions on the right to know and the clarification of fate and whereabouts of missing persons, social support for families and commemoration of missing persons. They discussed recommendations and possible next steps on how religious circles can assist families of missing persons.



Two-day IHL seminar at Defense Services Command and Staff College

A two-day seminar was organized for 147 army, navy and air force officers on introduction to IHL and international human rights law (IHRL), interplay between human rights and IHL, means and methods of warfare, IHL and new technologies. The seminar was conducted by the ICRC's regional delegate for armed and security

forces (Myanmar) at the Defence Services Command and Staff College (DSCSC) in March 2026. Participants included representatives from Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Maldives, Malaysia, Nepal, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia and Zambia.



Sri Lanka Army

Lecture on emerging technologies at National Defence College

An ICRC delegate for armed and security forces in the region conducted a lecture on emerging technologies, IHL and the ICRC's position on new technologies for 41 Tri-service officers, including the police (3) and foreign nationals (Bangladesh, India, Oman and Saudi Arabia), at

the National Defence College (NDC) in July 2025. The lecture was conducted as part of the module of science and technology on IHL and IHRL under the course on national security and strategic studies.



Sri Lanka Army

Facts and Figures

Addressing the needs of families of missing persons

3,286 families were contacted as part of ongoing efforts to maintain regular contact with people who initiated tracing inquiries with the ICRC.

Over 60 meetings were held with authorities, international representatives, family associations and civil society organizations to assess capacities, resources and partnerships of the national mechanism as well as follow-up engagement and implementation.

5 family leaders joined training of trainers session and a workshop on interacting with authorities conducted by the Central Tracing Agency in Geneva in partnership with Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation.

10 lectures on ambiguous loss were organized for 245 students of psychology. Participants comprised students pursuing postgraduate diploma in counselling psychology at the Faculty of Education, students of postgraduate

diploma in counselling and psychosocial support at the Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo, and undergraduate psychology students from University of Jaffna.

35 trainees of Bandaranaike International Diplomatic Training Institute attended 1 session on ambiguous loss.

54 students of the Faculty of Visual Arts at the University of Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo, and Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan Faculty of Performing and Visual Arts of the University of Jaffna, attended 2 lectures.

1 radio programme was conducted on ambiguous loss in partnership with the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation.

440 people reached through 12 awareness and outreach sessions on mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS).

Strengthening forensic capacity

2 needs assessments were conducted on the capacities for mass grave investigations and forensic genetic capabilities in Sri Lanka. 1 set of recommendations was delivered to the Office on Missing Persons (OMP) based on the assessment of capacities for mass grave investigations, aligned with international standards and humanitarian principles.

2 review sessions were facilitated and technical input was provided on the amendment of the Code of Criminal Procedure Act No. 15 of 1979 (Conduct of Inquest of Death), involving 37 representatives from the medicolegal and forensic services.

21 representatives from forensic services received academic resources, analytical tools and essential items to enhance practices in post-mortem examination of unidentified individuals.

2 awareness-raising materials related to missing person data collection and biological reference sample collection were developed with the OMP's assistance.

Promoting international humanitarian law (IHL)

30 army officers joined a two-day Military in Security Operations (MISO) training at SFHQ (Central), Diyatalawa, in July 2025.

198 Air Force personnel (aviation contingent) to be deployed to the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) joined pre-deployment briefings at IPSOTSL, Kukuleganga, in July and November 2025.

16 army IHL instructors from the Regimental Training Courses and training schools delivered IHL training to 890 Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs), 162 Officer Cadets (including foreign nationals from Zambia, Rwanda and Uganda) and 100 officers at various Regimental Headquarters from July to December 2025 under ICRC's observation.

1 brigadier attended SWIRMO in Saudi Arabia, in November 2025.

1 navy captain attended the Regional Naval Warfare Symposium in South Korea in December 2025.

96 army personnel (medical contingent) to be deployed to South Sudan (UNMISS) joined a pre-deployment briefing at IPSOTSL, Kukuleganga in January 2026.

34 IHL instructors joined a one-day refresher programme at SFHQ (West) and SFHQ (Vanni) in February and March 2026, to understand the challenges faced in using the IHL training package developed by the ICRC and receive further guidance on its use.

5 army IHL instructors from the Regimental Training Courses and Army Logistics School delivered IHL training to 332 NCOs and 5 officers from February to March 2026 under ICRC's observation.

1 briefing conducted by ICRC expert based in Haiti for 32 officers of the Sri Lankan contingent to be deployed in Haiti as Gang Suppression Force (GSF) in April 2026.

1 briefing conducted by ICRC delegate based in Washington for 70 officers of the Sri Lankan contingent to be deployed in Haiti as Gang Suppression Force (GSF) at IPSOTSL, Kukuleganga and Special Forces Training School (SFTS), Maduru Oya, in April 2026.

1 lecture entitled Clarification of the Legal Framework: 'Grey Zones', 'competition', 'hybrid warfare' and 'proxy warfare', was conducted by the ICRC's regional legal adviser for undergraduate students of the Faculty of Law, University of Colombo. The event included a networking session with IHL practitioners and experts from the South Asia Teaching Sessions (SATS) alumni.

3 moot court competitions were conducted in partnership with the University of Colombo, the University of Jaffna and the Open University of Colombo between November and December 2025.

1 representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs participated in the Regional International Humanitarian Law Conference held in Manila, Philippines, in August 2025, with the ICRC's support.

Supporting Sri Lanka Red Cross Society (SLRCS)

151 people, including branch-level volunteers, staff and government officials, trained in disaster preparedness and camp management through 2 camp management training programmes and 3 branch disaster response team training programmes in Mullaitivu, Batticaloa, Anuradhapura, Kurunegala and Puttalam.

2,000 sarongs and 2,000 kaftans were distributed to families affected by Cyclone Ditwah as part of the response in December 2025.

29 programmes were conducted by 15 SLRCS branches for 1,550 participants including children, volunteers, professionals and general public, raising awareness on humanitarian principles and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

25 awareness-raising workshops on the Safer Access Framework were conducted by district branches, with the participation of 500 volunteers.

36 people joined the Safer Access Framework and Dissemination National Workshop conducted in October 2025.

14 district-level events were provided with first-aid support, including 14 major first-aid services and 4 minor first-aid services.

20 awareness-raising programmes were conducted by 20 SLRCS branches for local councils, government officers, school communities and youth groups in commemoration of World First Aid Day.

7 meetings were held with the SLRCS's Restoring Family Links (RFL) unit to provide technical support and coordinate activities supporting missing people and their families.

Over 500 families who sought RFL assistance during the Cyclone Ditwah disaster were contacted, besides other RFL support provided by SLRCS with the ICRC's help following the cyclone.

1 SLRCS RFL officer participated in the Data Protection in Humanitarian Action training programme held in Bangkok, Thailand, with the ICRC's support.

11 Red Cross messages (brief personal messages) collected from Sri Lankan nationals detained in Ukraine were successfully delivered to their families in Sri Lanka via the SLRCS and replies were collected for transmission through the ICRC's Central Tracing Agency Bureau.

11 Red Cross Messages from Sri Lankans detained in Bangladesh were delivered to their families in Sri Lanka by SLRCS and replies were collected for transmission.

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