SRI LANKA

One school continued to be occupied by the military during 2017-2019, although armed conflict ended in 2009. In addition, police reportedly used force to disperse protests by school and university students and educational personnel during the reporting period.

Context

Sri Lanka has experienced relative peace since the end of the three-decade long conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan Government in 2009.

Sporadic episodes of violence not specifically directed against education took place in Sri Lanka after a period of relative calm. There were reports of violence between 2017 and 2019, with violent attacks on Muslim and Christian minority groups in certain parts of the country. The most significant were the Easter Sunday bombings on April 21, 2019 which were attributed the armed group “National Thowheeth Jamaath,” and inspired by the “Islamic State”, according to the International Crisis Group (ICG). These coordinated suicide bombings on churches and hotels took place in Colombo, Negombo, and Batticaloa cities, killing around 260 and injuring approximately 500 people; this constituted the country’s deadliest attack on Christians in recent years. Amnesty International reported that perceived Muslim refugees and asylum seekers were targeted in reprisal violence following the bombings. In March 2018, Buddhist nationalists carried out mob attacks on a Muslim community in Kandy, causing the government to declare a state of emergency. Political instability also caused insecurity during this reporting period. In October 2018, President Maithripala Sirisena dismissed the prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, causing a political impasse that fomented tensions within both the population and the coalition-led parliament. Different factions of the population also protested against the government’s failure to reform the “Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA)”, a law that allowed the government to detain people without due process, making them more vulnerable to torture. Human Rights Watch also reported that the implementation of transitional justice mechanisms adopted in 2015 at the Human Rights Council had largely stalled. Following the April 2019 bombings, the government ordered the nationwide closures of schools for two weeks to ensure the safety of schools and their surrounding areas. After the opening of schools, some parents refrained from sending their children to school due to security concerns, leading to reported low attendance after the attacks. On March 13, 2019, Sri Lankan authorities reportedly used violent force against a group of university students staging a protest against a proposed anti-terror law. In addition, teachers went on strike to demand regulation of teachers’ salaries, and that a greater proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) be spent on education.

Sri Lanka was not previously profiled in any edition of Education under Attack and therefore no comparisons can be made with previous reporting periods.

Attacks on school students, teachers, and education personnel

GCPEA collected one reported attack on teachers between 2017 and 2019. Various local media outlets reported that, on February 28, 2019, police fired teargas and water cannons at teachers and principals participating in a protest march outside of the Ministry of Education in Battaramulla, organized by the Ceylon Teachers’ Union. Media also reported that police first fired water cannons and then, after the protest resumed, used water cannons and teargas to disperse protesters, according to the Colombo Gazette. The protesters were allegedly demanding that the government correct salary irregularities and pay out 30 months arrears.

Military use of schools and universities

One school was reportedly used between 2017 and 2019 by military personnel, although there was no active armed conflict in Sri Lanka during the reporting period. The Tamil Guardian reported on March 8, 2019, that ethnic Tamils in Eravur Town, Batticaloa, protested for the removal of an army camp that was located on the grounds of Murakkoddan-senai Ramakrishna School and on the properties of 52 residents. The camp existed at the school for almost 30 years, according to the report.
Attacks on higher education

For the period of 2017-2019, the GCPEA collated reports of at least 20 incidents of attack on higher education students and personnel. Police arrested student protesters and used water cannons, baton charges, and teargas to disperse student groups protesting different university-related and political issues. Media reports alleged that over 100 students were injured, and dozens of students were detained, during the reporting period. A

According to media reports collected by GCPEA, in 2017, police used excessive force on student protesters in at least four incidents in Colombo. Students from the socialist Inter University Students Federation (IUSF) and the Medical Faculty Students’ Action Committee (MFSAC) demanded that the government take over the only private medical school in the country, the South Asian Institute of Technology and Medicine (SAITM). Examples of incidents included:

- Local media reported that on May 17, 2017, police used teargas and water cannons on students protesting SAITM in Colombo. The report claimed that approximately 5,000 university students defied a government ban on the demonstration and marched through the city. At least 16 students were injured and ten were arrested.

- On May 24, 2017, local media reported that police in Colombo used teargas and water cannons to disperse university students demonstrating against SAITM. The students attempted to overrun a police barricade.

- In Colombo, on June 21, 2017, Scholars at Risk and local media reported that police baton charged and used teargas on a group of student protesters from MFSAC and IUSF who were occupying a section of the Ministry of Health in protest of SAITM and the privatization of medical education; 84 students were reportedly injured and admitted to Colombo National Hospital. Students had damaged the ministry building, according to local media.

- On July 23, 2017, students from MFSAC held a non-violent protest in Lipton Circus, in Colombo. Police reportedly fired water cannons on students and arrested 13 undergraduates including one female, according to local media.

In 2018, incidents affecting higher education continued, with eight reported incidents involving university students. These events occurred in the context of demands related to the privatization of medical education, as in the previous year, as well as other campus-related and political concerns. This included the following:

- On May 18, 2018, police anti-riot squad fired teargas and water cannons at student members of the IUSF and MFSAC who organized a protest march from the University of Kelaniya, in Colombo, to the University Grants Commission, to demand a solution to ongoing problems with the nationalization of SAITM.

- On August 21, 2018, Scholars at Risk reported that police fired water cannons and teargas at students from South Eastern University of Sri Lanka who were protesting the suspension of their classmates and recent decisions made by the Minister of Higher Education. The reports noted that the students had obstructed traffic in Colombo and attempted to demolish barricades erected by the police to prevent students from reaching the Town Hall.

- Local media reported that on December 20, 2018, IUSF students in Colombo city organized a protest march to the Presidential Secretariat to protest student suppression at Rajarata and Agneediga universities. Police launched tear gas and fired water cannons to disperse protesters.

In 2019, GCPEA collected reports of at least nine incidents related to higher education students participating in protests, similar to previous years which included:

- On February 21, 2019, police in Colombo fired teargas and water cannons on student protesters who were advancing on government buildings, according to local media sources. The march, led by IUSF, opposed the suspension of lectures for students at South Eastern University of Sri Lanka.

- On March 13, 2019, a student protest organized by IUSF marched from the University of Visual and Performing Arts in Colombo, towards parliament, to demonstrate against the PTA counterterrorism act. Police reportedly used water cannons and teargas to disperse protests, and students allegedly threw back a teargas cannister at police, which police claimed injured an officer. One student leader was arrested, and released on March 18.
According to Scholars at Risk and local media, on March 19, 2019, students from IUSF and the Sabaragamuwa University held a protest over reductions to the number of student enrolments. Police, who launched teargas and water cannons to disperse crowds in front of the University Grants Commission, justified the use of force due to the students’ obstruction of traffic.

Scholars at Risk and local media Ada Derana reported that on August 28, 2019, students from IUSF held a protest march in Colombo against legislation that would have affected higher education. Police allegedly erected barricades and, when student protesters attempted to pass them, launched teargas and water cannons. Some students allegedly threw teargas canisters back at the police. The reports did not indicate any arrests or injuries of students.

“Five Things You Need to Know about This Week about Global Education (May 10, 2019), Theirworld, May 10, 2019.
Ada Derana (Sri Lanka) as cited in ACLED, Event ID SRI3176 (data downloaded February 27, 2020).
Combined total of injuries and detentions from incidents below (2017-2019).
News First, as cited in ACLED, Event ID SRI352; “Tear gas and water cannons used to disperse Inter-University protest,” News First, February 21, 2019.