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Grandmothers, mothers and wives of the disappeared in Kilinochchi, Sri Lanka, led 100 Days of continuous protest, blockading a main highway demanding justice and answers.

Tuesday, 30 May 2017 marked one hundred days of continuous protest by families of the disappeared in Kilinochchi. Around a 1000 protesters from every major district of the Northern and Eastern Provinces - some of whom have been conducting their own protests and hunger strikes - blocked the Kandy-Jaffna highway, demanding answers from the Sri Lankan Government, which is accused of mass abductions both during and after the war.

Amid fears of surveillance and harassment, the peaceful protest was organised and led by mostly women, many of whom are Tamil mothers, grandmothers, wives and daughters of the disappeared. Protest leader Leelavathi Anadarajah, whose son surrendered to the Sri Lankan Military in 2009 and was never seen again, said that families of the disappeared demand; a list of names of detainees in secret military camps, access for family members to visit their loved ones in such camps, and the immediate release of all those in custody.

“The Government has not paid attention to us at all,” said Leelavathi. “We started this protest with multi-religious prayer and now we are blocking a major highway. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe visited us months ago and said that most of the disappeared are dead. We do not wish to speak to the PM, and demand a meeting with President Maithripala Sirisena.”

Amongst the majority of Tamil families that rallied, were also Sinhalese families whose relatives were abducted in the south of the country. Sandya Ekneligoda, wife of disappeared journalist and cartoonist, Prageeth Ekneligoda, said that she had been going to court and marching the streets in hope of justice for her husband for 7 years.

“Today I'm here to join these women in the North who have been seeking the truth about their families for the past few years,” said Ekneligoda. “The military have been working tirelessly to conduct search and rescue operations for disaster-affected people in the south. Yet they have been unable to find the loved ones of these families for the past years.”

“Isn't it the armed forces that disappeared these people in the first place? The President has been very compassionate towards victims of this natural disaster. We ask for that same compassion here, as promised by this Government's election campaign,” said Ekneligoda.

While a meeting with President Sirisena could not be arranged due to natural disasters in the south. The office of the Northern Provincial Council delivered a statement to protesters claiming that the President would appoint a committee to investigate disappearances, and that an appointment with this committee could be made within two weeks.

It is estimated that more than 100,000 people have disappeared since the 1990s, leaving families devastated and with no resolve. In 2016, the Sri Lankan Government passed a Bill in Parliament to establish a permanent Office of Missing Persons (OMP), however, President Sirisena, is yet to operationalise this office. This year, the UN granted Sri Lanka a 2 year extension to meet its obligation to transitional justice.

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