



**LAWSUIT AGAINST SRI LANKA’S FORMER SECRETARY OF
DEFENSE FOR THE TARGETING AND KILLING OF RENOWNED
JOURNALIST UNSEALED**

*Daughter of Journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge Files Lawsuit against Gotabaya
Rajapaksa for the Murder of her Father on Tenth Anniversary of his
Assassination in Sri Lanka*

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San Francisco, California, April 15, 2019 – The Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA) has brought suit against the former Sri Lankan Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa for his alleged role in the extrajudicial killing of award-winning journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge and the widespread and systematic persecution of journalists perceived to be critical of the Rajapaksa government. The [civil complaint](#), filed on April 4, 2019, was unsealed today by a federal judge in the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California. Rajapaksa is a dual national of the United States and Sri Lanka, and served as Sri Lanka’s Secretary of Defense after obtaining his citizenship in the United States.

CJA’s complaint was filed on behalf of Lasantha’s daughter, Ahimsa Wickrematunge. In the aftermath of the attack on Lasantha, attempts to credibly investigate the killing in Sri Lanka were met with interference and delay. A decade later, there have still been no charges filed against those responsible for his death. Says Ahimsa: “My father was killed because he was a journalist devoted to freedom of the press. Although this case is a civil matter, my primary focus is for the world to know in a court of law how my father was killed and who allegedly ordered the killing. So far, despite strong investigative work by the police in Sri Lanka, politics has hindered the pursuit of justice.”

CJA Senior Staff Attorney Nushin Sarkarati said, “Violence against journalists in Sri Lanka was a tool used by the Rajapaksa administration to suppress a free and independent press, and the impunity for these abuses persists to this day. We now seek truth in a U.S. court with the hope of seeing such cases move forward in Sri Lanka.”

Gotabaya Rajapaksa served as Sri Lanka’s Secretary of Defense from 2005 to 2015 throughout the presidency of his brother, Mahinda Rajapaksa. The complaint alleges that during the final years of Sri Lanka’s decades-long civil war, the Rajapaksa government cracked down on perceived critics of the war effort and launched an assault on the free press.

One victim was acclaimed journalist, Lasantha Wickrematunge, who was killed by masked assailants in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo on January 8, 2009. He famously penned a final [editorial](#) to be published in the event of his murder. His funeral drew mourners from around the world, and statements condemning his assassination came from freedom of expression

organizations and governments alike. Known for exposing government corruption by senior officials and abuses committed during the war, Lasantha's writing drew criticism and threats from the Rajapaksa regime. The complaint alleges that members of security forces under the command of Gotabaya Rajapaksa were responsible for Lasantha's killing, and that the initial investigation into Lasantha's murder was obstructed by a number of cover-ups within the police department, which was also under the authority of Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

Gotabaya was personally served with a court summons and copy of Ahimsa's complaint on April 7, 2019 in Los Angeles, while visiting his family in the United States. He has until April 29, 2019 to respond to the allegations against him.

Ahimsa's case on behalf of her father was filed with support from Schonbrun Seplow Harris & Hoffman, and from the Mintz Group and Ideal Investigations.

For more information on the case, including a link to the complaint, visit <https://cja.org/what-we-do/litigation/wickrematunge-v-rajapaksa/>

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About the Center for Justice and Accountability

The Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA) is a San Francisco-based human rights legal organization dedicated to deterring torture, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and other severe human rights abuses around the world through innovative litigation, policy and transitional justice strategies that strengthen the global net of accountability. CJA partners with victims and survivors in pursuit of truth, justice, and redress, and has successfully brought cases against a former Minister of Defense of Somalia's Siad Barre regime, the military officer responsible for the assassination of Chilean activist and singer Victor Jara, and Syria's Assad regime for its targeted killing of war correspondent Marie Colvin. Visit www.cja.org.

More About the Torture Victim Protection Act and Civil Suits for Human Rights Abuses in the U.S.

CJA's case against Gotabaya Rajapaksa brings claims of extrajudicial killing and crimes against humanity allegedly committed in Sri Lanka. These claims are brought under two U.S. federal statutes, the Torture Victim Protection Act and the Alien Tort Statute, which allow victims of serious human rights abuses to seek a remedy in U.S. courts when perpetrators of these abuses seek safe haven or are present in the United States.

Passed in 1991, the Torture Victim Protection Act (TVPA) gives rights to U.S. citizens and non-citizens alike to bring claims for torture and extrajudicial killing committed in foreign countries. Similar to the [Alien Tort Statute](#), the TVPA allows for the filing of civil (rather than criminal) claims in U.S. courts when perpetrators of these abuses are present or within the jurisdiction of the U.S. Since it was passed, the TVPA has been used to hold foreign military officials, government officials, and paramilitary members accountable for human rights abuses. For more on the TVPA, visit <https://cja.org/what-we-do/litigation/legal-strategy/torture-victim-protection-act/>

The Alien Tort Statute is a U.S. federal law dating to 1789, which allows foreign victims of international human rights abuses to sue the perpetrators in U.S. courts, no matter where the abuses were committed, so long as the perpetrator is within the jurisdiction of the U.S. The law was first enacted to provide jurisdiction over certain transnational violations, such as piracy. In 1980, a U.S. court determined that a “torturer” has become the modern-day equivalent to a pirate, an enemy of all mankind, and should therefore be subject to our U.S. courts when they are found here. The ATS has been used to litigate violations of international law, including slavery, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide. For more on the ATS, visit <https://cja.org/what-we-do/litigation/legal-strategy/the-alien-tort-statute/>.