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20 YEARS ON FROM THE MUTTUR MASSACRE OF AID WORKERS

'IT CAUSES ME HUGE PAIN TO NOT HAVE ANSWERS'

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Executive Summary

Twenty years ago, seventeen of our colleagues, humanitarian workers for Action Against Hunger, were found dead in Muttur, Sri Lanka. They had been lined up in the Action Against Hunger compound, told to kneel, and shot at close range.

OUR COLLEAGUES WERE:



I. Muralitharan
33 years old



R. Arulrajah
24 years old



T. Pratheeban
27 years old



A. Jaseelan
27 years old



G. Kavitha
27 years old



K. Kovarthani
27 years old



V. Kokilavathani
29 years old



R. Sivapiragasham
25 years old



M. Narmathan
23 years old



M. Ketheeswaran
36 years old



M. Rishikesan
24 years old



S.P. Anantharajah
32 years old



G. Sritharan
36 years old



S. Koneswaran
24 years old



A. L. M. Jawffar
31 years old



Y. Kodeeswaran
30 years old



S. Ganesh
54 years old

The Muttur massacre remains one of the most egregious attacks against humanitarian workers ever, and there is yet to be any accountability for this crime. **In recent years, there has been a staggering increase in attacks against humanitarians**, over the past three years more than 1,010 humanitarians have been killed.¹ Behind these numbers there is an acute human cost: lives torn apart and populations deprived access to life-saving aid.

Twenty years on, we are calling on the Sri Lankan government to reopen a transparent, independent and effective investigation to identify the people responsible for the execution of our colleagues. Sri Lanka, like many other states, has signalled its commitment to accountability for attacks on humanitarians². We further call on other states to push for accountability in this case, and join us in the fight against impunity for attacks on humanitarian workers across the world.

Over the years, Action Against Hunger and other actors have publicly reported on the lack of accountability for the murder of our colleagues at Muttur, the probable perpetrators of this crime, as well as efforts to hide culpability. **This report twenty years later focuses on the lasting impact of the Muttur case on families, colleagues and the wider humanitarian community**. It is a reminder of the need for accountability, and the essential role of justice in the process of rebuilding lives.

Through dozens of interviews with families of the victims, Action Against Hunger staff who were on the ground in 2006, and other colleagues from the humanitarian sector present in 2006, we aim to shed light Muttur once again, and draw attention to the devastating impact of this crime.

Many of the quotes in this report are anonymised for the protection of those interviewed. Our deepest thanks to the families who agreed to share their experiences and painful memories with us.

NEVER FORGET. NEVER GIVE UP.

¹ Statement by Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs on 8 April 2026: <https://www.unocha.org/news/over-1000-aid-workers-killed-3-years-often-hands-member-states-un-relief-chief-demands>

² By signing the Declaration on the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel, art 19: <https://protect-humanitarian-personnel.org/>

Background

THE FACTS OF WHAT HAPPENED LEADING UP TO THE MUTTUR MASSACRE

Outbreak of fighting

In the early 2000's Sri Lanka was facing an acute humanitarian disaster. Action Against Hunger, along with hundreds of other humanitarian actors, responded, delivering services to over 116,000 people across Sri Lanka in the year prior to the Muttur massacre. The response focused on water, sanitation and hygiene programmes (WASH) to address overlapping crises:

“ **Our mission began as a tsunami response - supporting communities devastated by the wave of 26 December 2004 - and rapidly evolved to address the humanitarian consequences of the conflict re-igniting between the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) and government forces across the east and north of the island.** Fabrice Carbonne, Action Against Hunger Trincomalee Head of Base March 2005 – June 2006. ”

On the 1st of August 2006 a team of seventeen Action Against Hunger humanitarian workers were delivering clean drinking water programmes in of Muttur, a town in northeast Sri Lanka, when fighting broke out and they became stranded.

“ **Muttur was the entry gate to our operations in the south of the province, reachable only by ferry.** Fabrice Carbonne, Action Against Hunger Trincomalee Head of Base March 2005 – June 2006. ”

Due to the risk of being caught in the heavy shelling, the decision was taken for the Muttur team to remain in the Action Against Hunger compound. They increased the signage at the compound and put on Action Against Hunger t-shirts in order to show that they were humanitarian workers, and therefore protected from attack under international humanitarian law.

“ **I spoke to my brother who was stranded in the Muttur compound on the phone, he told me they were safe, that cars were being sent to evacuate them.** X, brother of one of the victims. ”

Over the days following the 1st of August, Action Against Hunger along with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) attempted several evacuations by car and by boat, but were not granted the necessary security guarantees by the fighting parties and were unable to go ahead. The Sri Lankan Army, Navy and Police were informed of the presence of the Muttur team and GPS coordinates were shared in order to protect them from accidental shelling. As Muttur civilians fled the town, they came under heavy bombardment which killed over 150 people.

“ **On the 4th of August at around 7:45am we lost radio contact with the team.** Andrew Mitchell Action Against Hunger Desk Officer in 2006. ”

On losing contact, Action Against Hunger again attempted to reach Muttur to evacuate the team, but were stopped at an army checkpoint 10km away from the compound. Over the following days they continued attempting to reach Muttur but were unsuccessful. Despite losing contact, the teams and families kept hoping:

“ **My parents did not eat for days while we waited to find out what had happened. They spent all day at the temple holding onto the little hope they had left.** Z, brother of one of the victims. ”

Discovery of the massacre

On the 7th of August 2006 the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies (CHA), an association of national and international agencies, finally gained access to the Action Against Hunger compound and discovered our seventeen colleagues dead, face down. They appeared to have been shot at close range. The following day, a convoy of Action Against Hunger staff finally reached Muttur and recovered the bodies of their colleagues.

“ I, along with other Action Against Hunger expatriates, attended some of the autopsies. It was at that moment, when we saw the trajectory of the bullets, that we were able to confirm not only that they had been executed, but also that they had been forced to kneel before being shot. It was no accident. Florence Daunis, Action Against Hunger Director of Human Resources in 2006. ”

In the days following the massacre at Muttur, Action Against Hunger experienced an outpouring of grief from the humanitarian community at large.

“ Muttur became a symbol of the lack of protection for humanitarians. The fight for justice that we undertook afterwards went far beyond only Action Against Hunger. François Danel, Action Against Hunger Deputy Director General in 2006. ”

Humanitarians are neutral and impartial. They deliver essential services to people in need and they should never be attacked. The Muttur massacre was a war crime:

“ She was killed while helping people, she was forced to put her hands behind her head and she was murdered, it was no accident. Y, brother of one of the victims. ”



Action Against Hunger building wells to provide safe water in Sri Lanka, 2006



Action Against Hunger teams travelling to deliver humanitarian aid, 2006

Never Forget

TWENTY YEARS ON FROM THE MUTTUR MASSACRE, WE HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN

Our colleagues were humanitarians

The young men and women who were working so tirelessly to bring basic services to ordinary people live on in our memories.

“ **The team I knew at Muttur weren't outsiders, they were members of the local community working to help those around them.** Andrew Mitchell, Action Against Hunger Desk Officer in 2006. ”

“ **They were extraordinary humanitarians - ready to go out on a Sunday to repair a water pump, because a community was waiting. Service was not a job description; it was who they were.** Fabrice Carbonne, Action Against Hunger Trincomalee Head of Base March 2005 – June 2006. ”

The team were not only committed humanitarians, but brothers, sisters, parents and friends:

“ **I looked up to my brother, he was like a father to me. We were always joking around, even up to the last time we saw one another.** X, the brother of one of the victims. ”

“ **We were not just colleagues on paper; we were a community. Together we held parties, birthdays, weddings, farewell celebrations, football tournaments.** Fabrice Carbonne, Action Against Hunger Trincomalee Head of Base March 2005 – June 2006. ”

The suffering of the families

The families of the victims are those who suffer the most, enduring acute trauma and grief from the memories of that terrible period, and the violent way in which their loved one was killed continues to haunt them. They are also victims of this terrible event:

“ **My parents were completely broken down. My other sister and I were strong so we did not cry, but my parents were broken.** Y, the brother of one of the victims. ”

Many have struggled to rebuild their lives following the brutal loss of their loved one:

“ **The death of my brother is the event which has had the biggest impact on my life. Until this day my family and I can't make things right.** Z, the brother of one of the victims. ”

The lack of justice in this case has been a significant source of suffering amongst family members. Nobody has ever been held responsible for the massacre, leaving families wondering about the final moments of their loved ones, without a place to commemorate them in Sri Lanka and honour their memory:

“ **I have visited the compound where my brother was killed, there is nothing there just an empty house. I went there and I cried.** X, brother of one of the victims. ”

“ It causes me huge pain to not have answers. The loss will hurt me now until the end of my days. ”
W, relative of one of the victims.

Action Against Hunger after Muttur

This event has left an undeniable mark on Action Against Hunger as an organisation, this terrible event lives on in our collective memories and reminds us as we operate humanitarian programmes all over the world that our safety is not always guaranteed.

“ We believed that displaying our humanitarian identity – t-shirts with logos, signage and flags - would provide a form of protection. Realising that we were wrong, and that the military paid no attention to it whatsoever, was devastating. ”
François Danel, Action Against Hunger Deputy Director General in 2006.

Those who were closely involved in the events surrounding Muttur were profoundly impacted on a personal level.

“ For ten years whenever I heard the sound of a crow it took me back to the courtyard of Trincomalee hospital, to the day of the autopsies. ”
Florence Daunis, Action Against Hunger Human Resources Director in 2006.

In 2006, a promise was made to families.

“ Just after the murders I went to Sri Lanka and I met the families. We promised them that we would never forget and that we would keep fighting for justice. That promise remains until today, twenty years later. ”
Benoit Miribel, Action Against Hunger Director General in 2006.



Never Give Up

FOR TWENTY YEARS, ACTION AGAINST HUNGER HAS FOUGHT FOR JUSTICE

National procedures without outcome

Action Against Hunger went on to actively cooperate in several national investigations run by the Sri Lankan authorities, but concluded in 2008 that these investigations were marred with irregularities³. Local police did not fulfil their obligations to secure the crime scene, preserve evidence or even collect the bodies of those killed. The bodies of our slain colleagues were left in the compound for several days, until Action Against Hunger staff finally gained access and themselves had no option but to load the dead bodies of their colleagues onto trucks.

“By the time we received my sister’s body it was too decomposed to conduct the funeral in our traditional manner. I will never forget the pain of this. Y, brother of one of the victims.”

Furthermore, investigations were the subject of politically motivated interference. This included failure to secure evidence such as bullets which may have pointed to the responsibility of the Sri Lankan Special Forces, the intimidation of witnesses to prevent them from testifying, and orders from high level officials in the Sri Lankan government to stop investigating certain people. These irregularities are detailed in the Action Against Hunger report titled *‘The Muttur Massacre: a struggle for justice’*, published in 2008 and subsequent report in 2013 pointing out the irregularities.

“We were plunged into a web of investigations: ballistic reports, interactions with the local commission, and interventions from officials acting in utterly bad faith. François Danel, Action Against Hunger Deputy Director General in 2006.”

International efforts thwarted

Following the failure of these national investigations, Action Against Hunger continued speaking up, hoping that justice may be served by the international community through international bodies. In 2012 Action Against Hunger made a submission to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a UN body tasked with reviewing the human rights record of countries, in which we stated:

“The international community must adequately address Sri Lanka’s utter failure to fulfil its international obligations.”⁴

Successive resolutions on Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council were ineffective in pushing accountability in Sri Lanka, until 2014 when the Council voted to open an international investigative mechanism on crimes committed during the civil war, including the massacre at Muttur. This investigative mechanism in 2015 found that members of the Sri Lankan security forces were responsible for the Muttur massacre, and that witnesses were threatened into silence by the Sri Lankan authorities.⁵ At the time, Action Against Hunger declared, referring to the Council decision:

³ See ‘The Muttur Massacre: A struggle for justice,’ Action Against Hunger, June 2008: <https://www.actionagainsthunger.org/app/uploads/2022/09/ACF-IN-Sri-Lanka-Advocacy-Report-6-18-08.pdf>, and ‘Muttur: Six Years of Impunity,’ February 2013: <https://www.actioncontrelafaim.org/en/news/publication/muttur-six-years-of-impunity-the-failure-of-justice-in-sri-lanka/>

⁴ ‘Submission to the United Nations Periodic Review regarding the Muttur massacre,’ Action Against Hunger, 2017: <https://uprdoc.ohchr.org/uprweb/downloadfile.aspx?filename=4286&file=EnglishTranslation>

⁵ ‘Report of the OHCHR investigation on Sri Lanka (OISL),’ OHCHR, 2015: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/803408>

“ This is a landmark decision in the fight against impunity for crimes against humanitarian workers. ”

However, the recommendation of this report, to establish an international court to try the crimes committed during the civil war, did not materialise due to lack of cooperation by successive Sri Lankan governments. In 2021, the UN Office for Human Rights said:

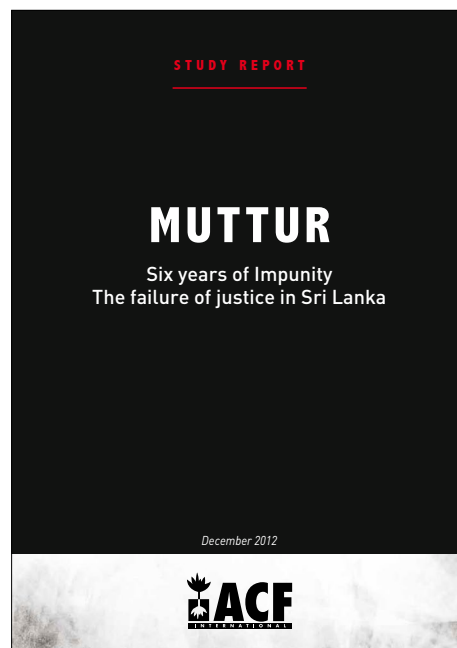
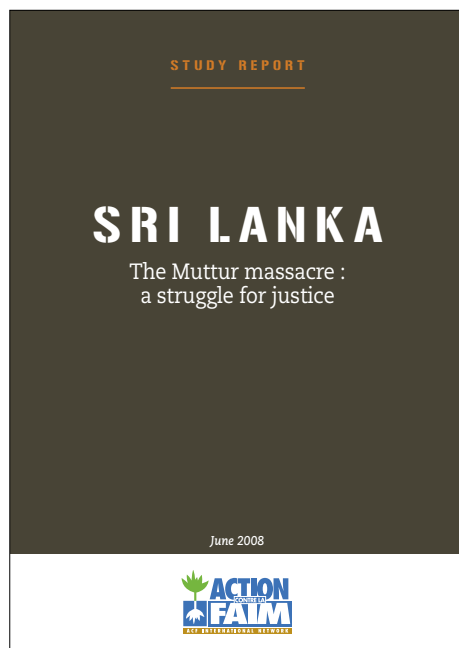
“ Sri Lanka remains in a state of denial about the past, with truth-seeking efforts aborted.⁶ ”

Action Against Hunger continued to call for justice in the Muttur case, including at the UN Security Council in 2021.

Today's hope for justice

As the 20th year anniversary of this horrific crime approaches, we believe that the time is now. Sri Lanka has shown its commitment to the protection of humanitarian workers by signing the Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel. We call on Sri Lanka to make good on its commitments both under this Declaration and International Humanitarian Law, and finally provide answers to the families.

“ I am waiting for the day that there is justice. That is when I will truly commemorate my sister, that is the day I will truly light a candle for her. Y, brother of one of the victims. ”



⁶ Sri Lanka on alarming path towards recurrence of grave human rights violations: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/01/sri-lanka-alarming-path-towards-recurrence-grave-human-rights-violations-un>

Conclusion

A call for justice

The young men and women we lost on the 4th of August 2006 were working tirelessly in Muttur to deliver lifesaving aid. **Their deliberate killing was not just an attack on them, but an attack on the rights of communities for whom they were working: an attack on humanitarians is an attack on the ability of people to access aid.** The Muttur case demonstrates a complete disregard for International Humanitarian Law, under which civilians including humanitarian workers are protected. Even worse, this case has languished in impunity for two decades, an impunity which continues and to this day is a damning assessment of the respect for the protection of humanitarians.

Behind this most egregious attack on humanitarians are the families who suffered a most terrible loss; the loss of a sister, brother, father, husband. Twenty years on and the events in August 2006 continue to haunt them – the phone calls to their loved one, the conviction that they would be evacuated and finally the devastating realisation that they would not be coming home. **Following the violent death of their family member, they have endured the indignity of no justice.** For years families have suffered in silence, attempts to seek the truth have often led to reprisals from the Sri Lankan authorities and they continue to live with the pain of knowing that those responsible for the murder of their loved ones have not been punished.

Twenty years on and Action Against Hunger is still demanding the truth. We call on the Sri Lankan authorities to reopen an investigation into this case. The Muttur case has been shadowed in impunity for too long, the time for answers is now.

“ For Muttur, and for humanitarians everywhere,
we will never forget, and we will never give up. ”

Perrine Benoist, Action Against Hunger Co-Director General.



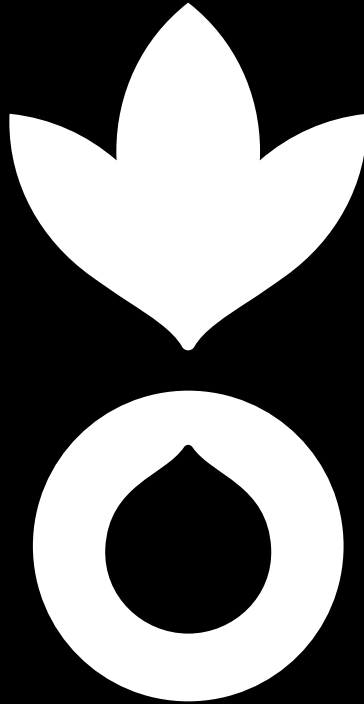
Recommendations

On the Muttur massacre, we call on

- **The Sri Lankan authorities to** reopen an impartial, transparent and effective investigation into the massacre of our seventeen colleagues at Muttur in 2006.
- **States to** call on Sri Lanka to address the impunity in the Muttur case by opening an impartial, transparent and effective investigation into the events of 2006. Further, to continue to address the case bilaterally and collectively until the truth is established.
- **The international community**, including the UN, to continue following up at all levels on any developments on the case.

We further call on States to

- Reaffirm their full adherence and compliance with international humanitarian law and to further reinforce their humanitarian diplomacy aiming to protect, engage, stand for IHL compliance, principled humanitarian action and protection of civilians and humanitarian personnel.
- Speak out and denounce attacks against humanitarian workers based on country-specific and case-by-case analysis and with the consent of the organisation concerned.
- Reinforce existing non-judicial and judicial mechanisms, including through respecting the principle of universal jurisdiction and adapting criminal laws at national level to ensure access to effective remedy following serious violations of international humanitarian law, including those affecting humanitarian and health workers.
- Systematically open investigations when crimes against humanitarian personnel, which could amount to war crimes, are committed.
- Fully fund programmatic initiatives supporting aid workers, survivors of attacks and their dependents, through adequate practical support including financial, mental health and psychosocial support, and legal assistance.
- Support the appointment of a special envoy on the protection of humanitarian space attached to the UN Secretary General or the emergency relief coordinator to appropriately follow up on attacks against humanitarian personnel.



NEVER FORGET. NEVER GIVE UP

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Action Against Hunger is an NGO that has been fighting hunger all over the world for over forty-five years. It leads a coordinated response in more than fifty countries. Its priority is to take concrete action on the ground and to bear witness to populations' experiences, while combatting the causes and consequences of malnutrition in France and internationally. As the causes of hunger are multiple, ACF's action is global, sustainable and effective, thanks to its unparalleled expertise in nutrition and health, food security, water and sanitation, and mental health.