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**SRI LANKA**

## SNAPSHOT

## Preventing and Prosecuting Sexual Violence

Through improved victim treatment, better evidence collection, and stronger coordination between local authorities, SAFE has improved the judicial system's response to sex-based crimes.



Youth from Sri Lanka's north participate in an awareness raising campaign about the problem of sexual violence.

*“Most of the people who commit these offenses [do so] because they think they can get away with [it],... They think they can suppress the evidence. If they know they cannot get away with this and the criminal justice system will ruthlessly pursue them and they will be convicted and they will have to face the consequences, they will think twice before committing these offenses.”*

- Hon. Palitha Fernando  
Attorney General of Sri Lanka

**December 2013** – The psychological wounds left over from the sexual violence inflicted during Sri Lanka's 30-year civil war remain raw even now, four years after peace was proclaimed. The desensitizing effects of prolonged, systematic sexual violence have left many Sri Lankans inured and resigned to such abuse, and in turn left women and children susceptible to these crimes long after the formal cessation of hostilities. The most vulnerable are internally displaced persons, returnees, and other conflict-affected individuals in the North and East.

To turn the tide against sexual violence and, in so doing, promote post-war reconciliation, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives implemented a two-year program, known as the Sexual Assault Forensic Examination (SAFE) program, comprised of 30 activities. These activities included curriculum development and training for medical and legal professionals, distribution of "SAFE kits", provision of resource books and specialized equipment, creation of child-friendly examination spaces, initiation of a national database to record sexual assault case information, and awareness raising campaigns.

Though only just completed, the SAFE program is already having an impact. Previously, sexual assault victims were not asked for their consent before being examined, and often medical examiners would do so against their will. SAFE worked with the Government of Sri Lanka to include a victim consent section on the national Medico-Legal Examination Form. Women and children will no longer be re-victimized in the name of medicine or justice.

Additionally, stakeholders and prosecutors are now involved in dialogues on sexual assault case management. Government officers now recognize sexual assault incidents as serious and criminal offenses. Communities now understand the importance of medico-legal care for sexual assault victims, and reports of sexual assaults—now closely monitored by the Ministry of Health in a database developed by SAFE—are on the rise as a result of awareness campaigns and training.

“Most of the people who commit these offenses [do so] because they think they can get away with [it],” said the

### Telling Our Story

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*Provision of SAFE Kits to the Judicial Medical Officers of Kurunegala, Sri Lanka.*

Attorney General of Sri Lanka, the Hon. Palitha Fernando, at a USAID training event carried out in partnership with his office. “They think they can suppress the evidence. If they know they cannot get away with this and the criminal justice system will ruthlessly pursue them and they will be convicted and they will have to face the consequences, they will think twice before committing these offenses.”

A SAFE kit costs less than \$20 to assemble. The affordability of the kit is a key factor in the likelihood of the program’s sustainability. Already, the Ministry of Health has demonstrated dedication to the cause by adopting the SAFE kit model and by adding funding to their annual budget to support the kits’ availability. Other indicators of long-term sustainability include: an increase in coverage for the North and East from one medico-legal officer for all cases to now 22 medico-legal officers, all trained through the SAFE program; a medico-legal examination training turnout rate of 85%; and the active involvement of youth in awareness campaigns and demonstrations about the problem of sexual violence.