

THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN SRI LANKA

Thursday, July 2, 2009

Since January 2009, the world has witnessed what UN and other independent observers have described as a “humanitarian catastrophe” in Sri Lanka.

Leading up to its final military assault in mid-May, the Sri Lankan government conducted indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas, in violation of international law, as part its military campaign against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Some 300,000 Tamil civilians have become Internally Displaced Persons (IDP's) trapped in *de facto* concentration camps, without adequate food, water or health care, and where human rights abuses are reported to be common.

Despite repeated calls from the international community, the Sri Lankan government has barred international humanitarian agencies, independent observers and journalists from its mass detention camps. In the meantime, the human rights situation outside the conflict zones in Sri Lanka has deteriorated dramatically. Political opponents of the government and independent journalists have been subject to threats, intimidation and assassination, irrespective of their ethnic origin.

Past LTTE tactics such as suicide bombings and preventing civilians from fleeing conflict zones are unacceptable. However, they do not justify the Sri Lankan government's systematic violation of the human and democratic rights of the Sri Lankan Tamil community, or the suppression of free speech and political opposition.

There is an urgent need to respond to both the humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka and the need for a lasting resolution of the Sri Lankan conflict. The huge demonstrations in Toronto by members of the Tamil Canadian community were an expression of both anguish and frustration. In early June, Labour Council along with the Canadian Tamil Congress and Urban Alliance on Race Relations put out a call for the creation of a broad coalition to pressure both the Canadian and Sri Lankan governments, and to raise public awareness on this vital issue.

On June 30th, a media conference formally launched Canadians Concerned about Sri Lanka – which gathers together a wide range of labour, refugee and human rights groups, faith leaders, academics and civil society representatives. CCSL will be focusing on the following goals:

- Full Access of independent observers and international media to all refugee camps in Sri Lanka
- Allow delivery of food and humanitarian supplies by NGOs to refugees in camps
- Expedited process for refugees to Canada for family reunification.
- Expedited process for the protection and care of children affected by the war, that is consistent with the ‘Best Interests of the Child’ principle articulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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- Develop international support and reach out to other international players

- Push for a just political solution based on full rights for all citizens including the genuine aspirations of the minorities of Sri Lanka
- Advocacy for the safety and security of Internally Displaced Persons, their right to free movement and timely resettlement to their homes
- Call for prosecution of all Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes committed by any parties during the war

Given the intransigence of the Sri Lankan government, this will not be an easy task. It will take a strong commitment from people of all walks of life in Canada to achieve these goals. The Executive Recommends:

1. Labour Council continue its leadership role in *Canadians Concerned about Sri Lanka*, including initial financial support and secretariat functions for the ongoing work of CCSL.
2. Labour Council request affiliates and labour activists to also support the work of CCSL in the months ahead.