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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES (HANSARD)

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SRI LANKA CIVIL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS



Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE MP (Strathfield) [5.08 p.m.]: Sri Lanka is in crisis. This is a nation divided—a nation where civil, political and economic rights are not equally shared. Last week I returned from a visit to Sri Lanka, where I went to witness these things for myself and to research a suitable project for funds raised here after the tsunami to assist victims and their families in Sri Lanka. I did so at the urging of the 3,000-strong Tamil community in my electorate of Strathfield, Sydney, New South Wales. Many came as refugees fleeing the 20-year civil war in Sri Lanka. They are proudly Australian, exemplary citizens contributing much to our civic life and community. But they are also deeply concerned for their homeland, especially the Tamil minority.

The Tamils are a distinct people with their own language, culture, traditions and spirituality. Since independence in 1948, power has been vested mainly in the Singalese—predominantly Buddhists—who currently comprise about 80 per cent of the population. The Tamils—mainly Hindus—comprise the remaining 20 per cent of the population, along with much smaller Christian and Muslim communities.

Over time these minorities have progressively seen their rights eroded through ingrained discrimination and segregation. As a result, the Tamils and other minorities have a sense of oppression and alienation. These are some examples of that discrimination at work. Tamils have to get higher marks than Singhalese for entry to the same courses at universities. In the Civil Service and private enterprise, jobs have been systematically allocated to Singhalese over Tamils. In enterprise and commerce the Tamils have been systematically cut out of the opportunities afforded to the majority. Several Catholic priests informed me about the systematic and endemic abuse of human rights by the Sri Lankan Government within the Tamil community. Indeed, one priest gave me a six-page list of churches damaged and destroyed by aerial bombing and shelling in the north of the island. There were 93 fully damaged, 186 partially damaged and 20 requiring minor repair! All these things breed resentment, frustration and hatred.

To make matters worse, the majority-dominated Government has manipulated and used the media to provoke bias against the minorities. Racism and fear is fostered. It is the politics of division, exclusion and misrepresentation, with the truth hidden from the outside world. I experienced first-hand a concerted campaign to prevent me from travelling to Tamil Eelam. Before I left Sydney, the editorial advisor and head of the Australian Bureau of the *Asian Tribune* alleged I was carrying nearly \$100,000,00 cash into Sri Lanka. If true, this would have meant I had broken Australian law as well as placing my life in danger. I believe this was a covert effort to try to scare me from visiting Sri Lanka. Thankfully I did not fall for this pathetic attempt and I was able to witness for myself the suffering of this proud people as well as their determined efforts to rebuild their community. The Tamils are a resilient people. I observed that in a remarkable three-year period the Tamils developed a virtual state within virtual state within the north and north-east of Sri Lanka.

I visited their judiciary and court, school of law, police station, police academy, medical and technical colleges and small industries, a community bank plus a children's home housing 278 children left orphaned by the war and the recent tsunami. The Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO) runs a variety of development, relief and reconstruction projects as well as assisting several non-government organisations with their projects. All this is a tribute to the spirit and resilience of the Tamil people. But it is no substitute for a final political settlement to this long-lasting dispute. Thankfully, some sort of end is in sight with a cease fire brokered by the Norwegian Government signed in February 2002. For the first time in a generation, the economy started to flow and people could travel about the island, albeit it with some difficulty. It is the beginning of a road map for lasting peace, and now the Sri Lankan Government must deliver by giving up its monopoly of power. That means a genuine federal structure that guarantees the right of the Tamil minority to autonomy so they can protect their culture and enjoy full economic and political rights.

Every human has the right to a place they can call home, and to equality of opportunity, to social justice, to freedom: one united Sri Lanka based on a federal structure with equity and self-determination for the Tamil people. War is destructive and tragic. There are casualties on both sides. Acts are committed that should never have happened in civil society. The curtain needs to be pulled right back. The Tamil and other minority groups need support. The international community needs to take urgent action, conduct independent research, visit these areas, engage with the community and see first-hand what is happening. That is my prayer and hope for this beautiful country. Then the weapons can be put away forever. Then the precious resources of this bountiful country can be put into improving the lives of these beautiful people who have suffered so much for so long. That is worth the dream. That is worth the effort. That is worth the struggle. I commend the plight of the Tamil people to the House. (*end*)