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“c125,000 British Tamils march in protest of the continued genocide of Tamils by the Government of Sri Lanka

A massive c125,000 Tamils in the UK and friends came together to march in London on 31 January 2009 to highlight the plight of an estimated 350,000 Tamil civilians caught up in the unrelenting onslaught by the Sri Lankan armed forces. Regarded as one of the biggest marches in London, the demonstrators showed impressive solidarity with their brethren facing deadly peril in Sri Lanka. The march proceeded peacefully. It was remarkable to note the high proportion of British born Tamils participating. The protest, which was arranged in less than a week by Action Committee Against Genocide of Tamils, an umbrella body made up of several Tamil organisations, commenced at 1pm at Millbank, Central London and continued till Temple Place where it ended at 6pm.

Hundreds of Tamil civilians have been killed and maimed over the past few days by indiscriminate aerial bombing (including cluster bombs) and artillery attack. With the monsoon rains in full force, the civilians' torment is further magnified by the lack of food, shelter and medical assistance. The wounded are being left without medical treatment. The Norwegian Foreign Minister, Jonas Gahr Støre, in a statement issued on Tuesday 27 January said his government condemned the ongoing war in Sri Lanka, which has caused "unacceptable sufferings to the civilians," in the country.

Utterly horrified by the carnage unfolding in Sri Lanka, the peace marchers called on the international community to prevail on Sri Lanka to bring about an internationally sponsored immediate permanent ceasefire to be followed by peace negotiations. Showing much emotion, they also called on the international community to provide urgently needed humanitarian relief to the many thousands of civilians suffering untold misery. The emergency requires blood, medicines, medical equipment, sanitation, food supplies and temporary shelter to be delivered immediately to save the lives of the civilians.

So far, despite calls for an immediate ceasefire by the UK, EU and many other countries, the Sri Lankan regime has refused to do so and continues its onslaught with impunity. The Government of Republic of South Africa stated on 30 January "...we therefore urge both parties to return to the negotiating table as soon as possible. The announced ceasefire should be permanent and thus create conditions for parties to consult their respective constituencies freely and regularly."

The African National Congress (ANC) in its recent statement said that "...the continued conflict in Sri Lanka has been cited on the human rights watch international monitoring mechanisms as a conflict now reaching genocidal proportions"

The peace campaigners also called on the international media to expose the truth about this unfolding humanitarian catastrophe by getting around the cynical methods the Sri Lankan government has employed hitherto to suppress the truth. After banishing the international media, the NGOs and the UN agencies from the conflict zone and silencing the local media by assassinating leading journalists, the current hard-line Sri Lankan

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regime has succeeded in suppressing the truth emerging about what is widely accepted as a genocidal war against the centuries old Tamil civilisation in Sri Lanka. Spending millions of dollars on public relations, the Sri Lankan regime has attempted to, and in many instances succeeded in hoodwinking the international media.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay: "... It is the Government's duty to provide safety to all Sri Lanka's citizens, whatever their ethnic origin or political views," Pillay said. "That means not only protecting civilians during military operations in the north, but also ensuring space for journalists and human rights defenders to seek out the truth and expose abuses"

Over the last few weeks the civil war in Sri Lanka has severely intensified. As the Sri Lankan occupying Army continues advancing into the north, Tamils civilians have been cornered into a 250 square kilometre area of land. The International Red Cross estimates that a quarter of million Tamil civilians trapped in the 'safe zone' continue to face indiscriminate aerial bombardment and a lack of access to any basic food, sanitation or health care. Whilst the government claims to have designated this area as a war-free zone, the UN has repeatedly stated that there has been continued aerial bombardment of the area, with bombs falling on hospitals and ambulances. Over 450 people are thought to have died within the last 8 days, with many more seriously injured. Despite this the government has banned all aid from entering the area, along with NGOs and media, and has refused to enter into a ceasefire.

Witnessing the plight of their fellow Tamils in Sri Lanka, British Tamils came together to show their outrage at the humanitarian crisis. Wrapped up in gloves and scarves, the protesters braved the bitterly cold weather and descended upon Millbank, Central London, at 1pm to begin the protest march. The march led them past the Houses of Parliament, finishing at Temple Place at 6pm. The tens of thousands of Tamils filled the streets for all the eye could see. Public transport towards Millbank was overwhelmed by the sheer number of protesters. The tube services had to resort to dropping people two or three stations away, but protesters were not deterred and walked miles to arrive at Millbank.

In light of the urgency of the situation the protest was only arranged less than a week ago, with leaflets being handed out a few days later. Given such short notice, the size of the crowd is a testament to the outrage of the Tamil people. The supporters came from all around the UK and even from across Europe. The crowd included British Tamils from every generation, from children right through to their grandparents, as well as Tamils from every aspect of British life, such as doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers and businessmen and women. In an overwhelming show of solidarity for the cause, Tamil shops, businesses and Tamil Schools around the country remained closed during the hours of the protest. Several organisations, such as the British Tamil schools and UK university societies (e.g. Kingston Tamil School, University of Nottingham Tamil Society) and the Tamil Youth Organisation were present to express the views of second generation British Tamil youths.

The protesters marched behind a large banner reading 'Call for immediate ceasefire in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka! Stop bombing Tamil civilians. Sri Lanka! Allow Humanitarian Aid'. They were adorned with t-shirts that read slogans such as 'STOP Sri Lanka's GENOCIDE of Tamils' and 'FREE TAMIL EELAM' as well as carrying banners and placards that had messages such as 'International Community what are you waiting for?' and 'LTTE are sole representatives of Tamils'. The procession included women dressed in blood-stained clothes crying out their anguish as well musicians bringing the crowd together. Some protesters carried a coffin as a vivid symbol of the carnage that is occurring at present. As the crowd marched they expressed their indignation, collectively shouting 'Stop killing Tamil people!', 'We want a ceasefire!' and 'We want Tamil Eelam!' Despite the icy winds, the very young and very old alike raised their voices and chanted till the very end.

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A petition was handed over at the British Prime Minister's official residence 10, Downing Street by a selected few members of the organisers. The covering letter stated "As members of the British public and as Tamils, we urge you to act in fairness and justice to enforce an immediate ceasefire utilising all the possible tools at the disposal of the British Government. The situation in Sri Lanka is no longer an internal conflict but is now under the jurisdiction of international law as a consequence of the gross human rights infringements that of 500,000 innocent civilians as reported by International Committee of the Red-Cross (ICRC) and other United Nations Agencies. There must be no confusion that these violations are not simply the causality of a civil war but rather explicit contraventions of the United Nations charter by the government of Sri Lanka. As a result, we feel that there must be multilateral action, led by the British Government supported by the UN, to facilitate an immediate and lasting ceasefire and supply humanitarian aid"

Several MPs accompanied the protesters, such as Mr Simon Hughes (Lib Dem, North Southwark & Bermondsey), Mr Andrew Pelling (Independent, Central Croydon) and Mr Keith Vaz (Labour, Leicester East & Chairman of the Home Affairs Select Committee), expressing their own anguish and frustration at the recent events in Sri Lanka. While addressing the large crowd Mr Keith Vaz, stood on top of Temple Place, stated that he had just spoken to Mr David Miliband and conveyed the strength of feeling displayed today by c125,000 UK Tamil protesters. Mr Vaz stated that he urged Mr Miliband to call upon the British government to stop the war in Sri Lanka and went onto say that the 'democratic rights of the Tamil people should be recognised by the Sri Lankan government'. Mr Vaz also stated that the UK's UN ambassador had indicated to his Sri Lankan counterpart about UK's intentions of approaching the Security Council if Sri Lanka does not consent to a permanent ceasefire. Mr Vaz concluded urging the 'Indian government, in the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi, to call for peace'.

Sri Lankan Tamil MPs belonging to the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), Mr Sivajilingam and Mr Jeyanthamoorthy spoke movingly about the long suffering civilians and the need for a permanent negotiated solution between the warring parties. Mr David Pararajasingham spoke on behalf of the British Tamils Forum. He discredited reports that the LTTE is preventing civilians from leaving and stated that 'it is the will of the people to stay with the LTTE. The people are scared of being murdered, raped and tortured by the Sri Lankan Army'. He concluded by saying that 'Tamil Eelam is not negotiable, but Eelam will negotiate'.

Despite the magnitude and passion of the crowd, the protest was peaceful. The crowd was ably managed by 500 volunteers from a range of British Tamil organisations, under the supervision of the Metropolitan Police. Chief Inspector Mr Blanchard of the Metropolitan Police said that the protest march was largely a success except for a couple minor incidents. He also said generally it was in good spirit and the stewardship of the organisers was very helpful.

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Notes to Editors:

British Tamils Forum exists to harness the skills and the knowledge of the members of the forum, well-wishers and significant others including mainstream decision makers in the UK with the aim of alleviating the sufferings of the Tamils community in the Island of Sri Lanka and to further their right to self determination within a democratic frame work under pinned by international law, its covenants and conventions. The forum was set-up in 2006 when, with the support 88 British Tamil community organisations, it also published an open letter in the Times newspaper. For more information admin@tamilsforum.com and/or visit: www.tamilsforum.com