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## **Issued for Immediate Release**

### **PRESS STATEMENT – PRESS STATEMENT – PRESS STATEMENT**

#### **Tamils march to save 'imprisoned' brethren in Sri Lanka**

Over 100,000 people converged on the streets of London on Saturday 20 June 2009 to remember the tens of thousands that perished in the Sri Lankan state's final onslaught against the Tamil civilians and to call for the release of 300,000 that remain under threat of death, disappearance, rape and torture in government-run internment camps.

Protesters, carrying black flags and adorned in dark attire, marched to rouse the UK and international community into action over the following three demands:

- Stop the disappearances, rapes and torture occurring daily in the internment camps and find all those who were unaccounted for.
- Free people from the camps immediately so that they can return to their normal lives.
- Bring the perpetrators of the genocide against the Tamils to justice.

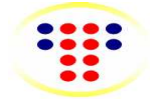
The Tamil community disappointed and embittered by the failure of the UK and other international powers, to prevent the recent carnage despite constant and repeated warnings, pleaded that the international community must at least act now decisively to save the 'imprisoned' civilians in these camps, who remain in grave danger.

The march, organised by the British Tamils Forum (BTF), began at Park Lane at 2pm, proceeded through the busy areas of Piccadilly, Whitehall and Parliament Square before following the river Thames to Blackfriars. It was well-received by the many shoppers, tourists and other onlookers present on the streets. It was also covered by a throng of photographers and TV cameras from mainstream international and Tamil media.

The march was led by a mocked-up concentration camp consisting of young and old Tamils dressed in blood-stained clothing and bandages surrounded by barbed wire – a disturbing portrayal of the plight of Tamil civilians trapped in these camps with depicting Army brutality. Following shortly behind was a heart-wrenching procession of people carrying photos of loved ones they had lost over the past few months. With tears in their eyes they marched on. In addition to the thousands of families, several groups such as students from the Tamil Youth Organisation and doctors from across the country marched in support of the cause. Groups from non-Tamil communities participated in the procession showing solidarity with the Tamil cause.

A Memorandum calling for immediate registration of all detainees, unfettered access to international aid agencies to the camps, immediate release of these civilians and facilitation of the prosecution of Mahinda Rajapakse (President of Sri Lanka), Gotabaya Rajapakse (Defence Secretary) and Lt. Gen Sarath Fonseka (Chief of Sri Lankan Army) for War Crimes against Tamils was handed to Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

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The end-point was marked by a stage adorned in the national colours of Tamil Eelam – yellow and red, carrying the words – “Free Tamils from Nazi style concentration camps! Prosecute the war criminals of the Sri Lankan State!”

Demonstrators heard rousing speeches from politicians, including Tony Benn, Simon Hughes MP and Jeremy Corbyn MP, social activists and members of different sections of the Tamil community. Notably, the crowds were also addressed by Tim Martin, the former aid worker and director of the charity Act Now, who fasted for 21 days in Parliament Square to highlight the plight of the Tamils and Ms Jan Jananayagam, an independent candidate at the recent European election, who received an unprecedented over 50,000 votes.

## **Speeches**

Veteran politician, freedom activist and former Labour cabinet minister **Tony Benn** called the actions of the Sri Lankan government against the Tamils a “crime against humanity”, in which Britain continues to play an “unacceptable role” by supplying arms to the Sri Lankan government. Emphasising that there cannot be peace in Sri Lanka until the democratic aspirations of the Tamils are truly recognised by both the Sri Lankan state and the international community, he thanked UK Tamils for bringing the plight of their Sri Lankan brethren to the attention of the UK public through their tireless activism. He also criticised the British media for the woeful lack of coverage the conflict in Sri Lanka has received, compared to similar conflicts around the world.

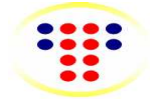
**Andy Higginbottom**, Secretary of the Columbia Solidarity Campaign and human rights lecturer at Kingston University, called the claims that the LTTE used civilians as human shields during the conflict the “first lie of the international media” and the “first propaganda victory of the Sri Lankan government”. He went on to denounce the inaction of the UN during the conflict, and the pitiable resolution passed by the UN Human Rights Council following the conflict, an “absolute and utter disgrace”.

**Cllr Julian Bell**, leader of the Ealing Labour Party and researcher for the All Party Parliamentary Group for Tamils (APPG-T), thanked the children who participated in the mocked up concentration camp for demonstrating graphically the plight of Tamil civilians in Sri Lanka. He also empathised that members of the APPG-T share the Tamil community’s feelings of being let down by the UK government. Finally he assured the crowds that the APPG-T were working hard to ensure that the food and medical aid that UK Tamils collected and sent to Sri Lanka on board the Mercy Mission ship, which was recently turned away by the Sri Lankan authorities, would still reach the desperate Tamil civilians of Sri Lanka.

**Raji Nesaraja**, representing the Tamil Youth Organisation (TYO), called the recent events in Sri Lanka “nothing short of genocide”, stating that the Sri Lankan government has “stripped us of our right to survive”. In a stirring speech that illustrated the strong feelings of young Tamils in the UK, she went on to say that, following their repeated and desperate warnings of an impending bloodbath, young Tamils were left dumbfounded and disappointed by the UN’s complete lack of response. To loud applause from the crowd she cried out, “UN, we are appalled.” Nevertheless, Raji expressed optimism in the awakening of all sections of the UK Tamil community in the last few months, and observed that “we are witnessing a global uprising of Tamils.”

**Dan Mayor**, national organiser for the Socialist Workers Party, angrily dismissed complaints of the cost of policing the 73 day Tamil protest at Westminster, saying that the British Government had received

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much more money than this through the sale of military equipment to Sri Lanka and had "blood on their hands". In addition to arm sales, he blamed the US/UK led 'War on Terror' and resulting anti-terror discrimination for weakening the Tamils' position to the extent that Sri Lanka's brazen onslaught against the Tamils was made possible.

**Jeremy Corbyn MP**, Labour politician and chairman of the human rights organisation Liberation, ridiculed the "nonsense" talked by some of his parliamentary colleagues during the Westminster protest about the "Majesty of Parliament" and traffic disruption, whilst innocent Tamil civilians suffered horribly in Sri Lanka. He called for a complete economic boycott of Sri Lanka, saying "the tourism must stop, the arms must stop, the trade must stop" and demanded for a "serious investigation into war crimes".

**Thaksha Ravikulan**, speaking on behalf of the British Tamils Forum, stated that the march by over 100,000 in January and over 150,000 in April urging action by the British government and the international community fell on "deaf ears". She accused Prime Minister Brown, President Obama, President Sarkozy and Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon for ignoring warnings by Tamil Diaspora and allowing a genocide on their watch. She called upon all Tamils and non-Tamils to unite behind "one voice", to overcome the challenges and achieving the goal under the principles of "nationhood, homeland and self-determination". She urged the international community to identify the real terrorists and recognise the Tamils' struggle for self-determination.

**Jan Jananayagam**, who stood as an independent candidate at the European election, reinforced that "the burden has fallen on the Diaspora" and urged the crowd to work tirelessly until the Tamils of Sri Lanka enjoy the same rights that Tamils take for granted in the UK. She also reminded the crowd of the power of their vote, and urged them to ensure they make their vote count during the next General Election.

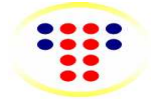
**Sivajilingam MP**, Tamil National Alliance, stated that the Sri Lankan government may have destroyed the defacto state of the Tamils with the connivance of the superpowers, but the struggle for freedom will never be extinguished.

**Simon Hughes MP**, a senior Liberal Democrat and long-time supporter of the Tamils, praised the "fantastic courage and determination" that UK Tamils have shown in the past few months, and assured the crowd that there were many non-Tamils that supported them in their aspirations. Stressing the importance of unity among the Tamils he expressed his hope that the Tamils have a better future ahead of them.

**Tim Martin**, former aid worker and director of the charity Act Now, was loudly cheered by the crowds as he thanked them for the huge support he received from UK Tamils during his recent 21-day hunger strike in Parliament Square. Revealing that Bob Geldoff, along with several other celebrities, have signed to pledge their support for the Tamils against Sinhala oppression, he urged UK Tamils to "keep on fighting" for their relatives in Sri Lanka.

**Mr Murugananthan**, on behalf of the British Tamils Forum made an arousing speech outlining the plight of our brethren and the responsibilities fallen on the Tamil Diaspora, and how the BTF will respond to the call of the hour.

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Metropolitan Police were full of praise for the organisers and the crowds for being so orderly. Crowds left the site at 6.15pm after formally reaffirming the Tamils right for self determination and self-rule in their traditional homeland in the island of Sri Lanka.

- Ends -

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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 Tamil community in the Island of Sri Lanka and to further their right to self determination within a democratic framework underpinned 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](mailto:admin@tamilsforum.com) and/or visit: [www.tamilsforum.com](http://www.tamilsforum.com)