



Tamils Rehabilitation Organisation

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TRO STATEMENT TO CIVIL SOCIETY/CHA

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A strong civil society is a sign that the mechanisms of democracy are still thriving.

TRO believes that the humanitarian work that we are engaged in provides services to the affected populations of the NorthEast that would otherwise not receive the assistance that they need and deserve. In our daily work, we witness communities who have undergone multiple displacements, who live in fear of nature's fury and manmade calamities alike, and for whom life has become an arduous struggle in the face of the harsh realities of poverty, war and natural disaster.

The Tamils Rehabilitation Organization cannot stand alone, not only in alleviating the conditions of hundreds of thousands of citizens residing in the NorthEast, but in re-infusing some amount of hope and confidence back into long-ignored constituencies. As a unified civil society, Sri Lankan civil society must realize, especially in the post-tsunami period that the only sustainable solution to development is to avoid dependency on foreign resources. Through the employment and volunteer base of local individuals, TRO is simultaneously accomplishing culturally effective relief, rehabilitation and development programs while building capacity and strength in the next generation.

Now, as eight of TRO's dedicated, selfless staffers face an uncertain fate, many more re-consider their dedication to TRO and to humanitarian work in general. What are the safe avenues left for those who seek to create a positive impact through their contribution to our society? In the past months and years journalists, members of parliament, teachers, principals, students, and humanitarian workers have become targets of violence. Now is the moment for solidarity across Sri Lankan civil society to stop this pervasive fear from completely paralyzing the generation which is the future of this country. Now is the time for civil society to unite to make a stand against terror.

The CHA and civil society in general must not be naïve to the implications of this specific incident on their own operations, programs, and staff. If a strong unified face is not shown to the outrages of the past week our fear is that it will be "open season" on international and local NGO's.

What is especially troubling to TRO has been the reaction of the media, civil society, the government and the law enforcement authorities to the two kidnappings TRO has been the victim of this past week. The question, however distasteful must be asked, "Would all of these actors' responses be the same had Sarvodaya, Sewalanka or any other "southern" NGO been the victim of these crimes." We are all registered under the same Social Services Act.

TRO appreciates the sympathies of the CHA, as expressed in the statement released on Thursday February 2nd but asks that CHA and all of civil society express their solidarity with TRO by making a clear and unambiguous demand for the immediate release of these 8 individuals and their safe return to their suffering families.

The challenges of relief and development are well-known to all of those gathered here and these challenges are more than enough to occupy the time and energy of all the staff at any NGO. As such, TRO had hoped to remain above the constant political attacks and politicization of aid which we have suffered, especially of late, and respond to the numerous physical and political attacks, you will remember that in September one staff member was killed in Batticaloa, by complying with Government Rules and regulations and continuing to "get the job of humanitarian relief done" on the ground in the most efficient manner conveying our worth as an organization through the satisfied beneficiaries in our many programs and holding ourselves up to the highest levels of transparency.

However, there are those who would continue to seek to politicize the work of TRO and politicize what is, in essence a criminal act: the kidnapping of our staff. In the past week, for fear of the safety of our staff, TRO has, in some parts of the NorthEast, been forced to divert our attentions away from the vital work we do in the humanitarian field and instead focus on the protection of our staff.

Once again I urge you to raise your voice and call for an end to this violence and call for the release of the kidnapped individual.

Arjunan Ethirveerasingam, TRO Project Development Manager, TRO - Colombo