

**PRESENTATION ON CURRENT SRILANKAN CRISIS**

TO

**STANDING COMMITTEE  
ON  
FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

BY

**Association of Sri Lankan Graduates of Canada (ASGC)**

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It's an honour and privilege for The Association of Sri Lankan Graduates of Canada to be invited for this presentation. I wish to extend our deepest gratitude for this invitation. I would like to begin my presentation with a brief introduction of our association. The Association of Sri Lankan Graduates of Canada known as ASGC was formed in 1989, as a non profit organization. It is run by University educated volunteers of Sri Lankan heritage with ASGC having no political affiliation. For the past twenty years, ASGC continues to elevate the educational and professional profiles of our community and successfully help the community to integrate with the Canadian main stream.

Having observed the recent developments in Sri Lanka, the Association for the first time decided to get involved in the Sri Lankan crisis, as the lives of the entire community here is being affected directly or indirectly by unfolding human tragedy in Sri Lanka

The committee in an emergency session passed three resolutions, a copy of which has been attached to this report marked addendum "A". The gist of the resolution as pertaining to the two warring parties are:

Lift embargo on food, medicine and other essential items flowing to the affected areas,

Stop indiscriminate bombing and shelling of civilian areas,

Cease fighting immediately and work towards a permanent and lasting solution,

Allow local and international NGO's and other humanitarian workers to provide much needed assistance to the trapped civilians,

Allow access to independent media,

Allow civilians to move freely to areas of their choice

In the international arena, Canada has an excellent reputation as an impartial peace keeper in conflict areas around the world. As the largest Tamil diaspora outside of Sri Lanka has chosen Canada to be their home, it is our sincere wish that Canadian government will take an active role in resolving the Sri Lankan crisis. Therefore, in the resolution we have requested that Canada plays a very major leadership in resolving this crisis.

To improve your understanding of the crisis, I must give you a glimpse of the history. It is documented that in Sri Lanka, those days known as Ceylon, there were three separate kingdoms - two Sinhalese and one Tamil, before colonial Britain conquered all kingdoms and established one unified rule for administrative purposes. During British rule they brought Tamils from India to work in the plantations. After giving independence in 1948, the British left the island as a secular state and with English as the administrative language. In 1956, the language of administration was changed to Sinhala only. Since then the various Sinhala majority governments have ruled with policies that discriminated Tamils in employment, education and political representation. Each time, a Sinhalese party tried to correct some of the mistakes, they ended up unilaterally abrogating the pacts when there was protest from the opposition Sinhalese party and the Buddhist priests.

The country was proclaimed as the Free Sovereign and Independent Republic of Sri Lanka - the name was changed from Ceylon to Sri Lanka in 1972. Under this constitution, Buddhism also became the official religion of the state, relegating Hindus, Christians and Muslims to second-class citizens. With the new Republican constitution, the language -Sinhala only, religion -state religion as Buddhism, new name - Sri Lanka, the flag - the lion with a sword symbolizing the Sinhalese, and the government sponsored colonization of Sinhalese in traditional Tamil areas, so that the country could now effectively be known as a Sinhalese land. Government sponsored armed groups also burnt down the largest Tamil Library in the Tamil area that had all the priceless Tamil history.

The Tamil parties fought the 1977 election on one issue—a call for a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka—and won 95% of all seats in the traditional Tamil area. But nothing happened to resolve the issue. Therein lies the birth of Tamil armed struggle and the current situation. Tamil militancy started with many groups and now the only active group left is the LTTE.

Since 1956, thousands of Tamils had to stand by and watch as their houses were set on fire, businesses looted, and relatives burnt to death. There were three major riots in 1958, 1977 & 1983 and many minor ones, and the Tamils were forced to become refugees in their own land—all because they spoke a different language. I have added a little more detail of the history in an addendum marked "B".

Since 1980's violence has taken over the island. As the Tamils felt that their grievances were not addressed through peaceful means, various Tamil militant groups started a guerilla war fare in many instance with the support of a neighbouring regional power. This guerilla warfare became armed resistance, funded and supported by this power. Unfortunately this interference by the regional power continues in different ways even now.

Since 1983, though various governments got elected with a promise of solving the problems, none have come up with a realistic working solution. Both the LTTE and the various governments have to accept joint blame for this status quo. Violence has been committed by both parties, as documented by various organizations, and innocent Tamil people have been at the receiving end of all these brutalities.

While violent acts committed by LTTE often get reported, in the post September 2001 era, the violence perpetrated by states are often ignored or justified as an act against terrorism. The Sri Lankan army even before the LTTE was formed has used the most violent measures to quell any type of even peaceful Tamil protest, as from 1958 they have considered themselves to be an army of occupation in Tamil areas. In the recent past, in their effort to gobble up territory held by the LTTE, the government forces have shelled populated areas indiscriminately.

To sum it up, it is not one party or the other that is causing this violence, but both of them. The current Sinhala government, in addition to giving a free hand to the army for their ruthless action in the traditional Tamil areas, has also suppressed or manipulated Tamil politicians, curtailed press freedom and freedom of expression and assembly, not to mention barring all types of third party presence, whether it be non-partisan NGOs', humanitarian personnel or media-related personnel, in the affected Tamil areas. Recently, a number of News paper editors have been arrested or simply shot dead.

The current situation in Sri Lanka begs the involvement of the international community. Whether the international community agrees or not, it is generally accepted among the majority of Tamils that the only group that was steadfast in defending Tamil rights— notwithstanding the violence—is the LTTE. There have been other groups from time to time, who have been eliminated by LTTE or have been coerced or bribed over to the government side. Many Tamils consider the violence by LTTE is justified, because they feel that had the

LTTE not existed, the Tamil population would have been wiped out or suffered more in the hands of the Sri Lankan armed forces. I am sure you would agree with us that violence from all quarters must be condemned, especially if it is coming from an elected government. The Sri Lankan government has taken measures to silence the Tamil elected politicians who were not toeing the government line. For example within the past two years, two of my former class mates who were members of parliament for two different parties were assassinated for supporting the Tamil cause.

While we talk about the LTTE and the government, we are all ignoring a major player in the conflict. That is the power and influences the Buddhist priests have exerted on various Sinhalese governments. If you study the history of pacts that were signed before the violence broke out, you will see that they were always abrogated when the Buddhist priests marched stating that the Sinhalese government are giving too much to the Tamils. The Sri Lankan constitution under section "9" says that the Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the state to PROTECT AND FOSTER BUDDHA SASANA. I quote here from the executive summary of the recent policy studies #40 titled Sinhala Buddhist Nationalist Ideology: Implications for Politics and conflict resolution in Sri Lanka by Neil De Votta of the East-West Centre in Washington. "A fundamental tenet of that nationalist ideology is the belief that Sri Lanka is the island of the Sinhalese, who in turn are ennobled to preserve and propagate Buddhism. The ideology privileges Sinhalese Buddhist super ordination, justifies subjugation of minorities, and suggests that those belonging to other ethno religious communities live in Sri Lanka only due to Sinhalese Buddhist sufferance." As recently as February there were four motions brought in our Canadian parliament against a bill that was tabled in Sri Lanka called the "Anti conversion bill."

In view of all this, in our opinion, as suggested in the resolution, Canada should take a leadership role and use its office to pressure both parties to come to a peaceful solution soon. If necessary, we feel that Canada should work towards imposing sanctions and take the matter at the United Nations. Simply put, force them to sit down at the negotiating table and come up with the solution. We don't think there is any better country in the world that will have the credibility as Canada has, to interfere in the Sri Lankan issue. Thousands of Tamils braved the weather and has been protesting to gain attention of the Canadians to

solve this problem as soon as possible. We think Canada is the only hope left to avoid a disastrous situation unfolding there. History has shown that there can be no long-term military solution to any ethnic conflict in any part of the world. LTTE is not the cause of the problem. LTTE is the by-product of the problem and that is why the root cause of problem must be solved. While we cannot say from here what type of solution is acceptable, after nearly 61 years of suffering, we can only voice what our association feels. Any solution arrived at, must be acceptable to Tamils, and should be modeled after typically what we have in Canada with Provinces adopting their own powers – an evolved form of Federalism.

Presently our main concern is for the fighting to cease and NGO's like our friends we have today and other agencies including all media be given free access to all areas. I am sure we will need the help of all the NGO's as without them our people would not have survived for so long. When the conditions are favourable in Sri Lanka, NGO's and other international agencies can help in building a prosperous and peaceful Sri Lanka. In conclusion, we would like to urge the Canadian government to do everything within your powers to bring peace to this island known as the pearl of the Indian Ocean.

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**Bibliography:**

<http://www.eastwestcenter.org/fileadmin/stored/pdfs/ps040.pdf>

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The Association of Sri Lankan Graduates of Canada unanimously adopted resolutions at a meeting held on Sunday, March 8, 2009. Full text of the resolutions is as follows:

**BRING PEACE TO TAMILS IN SRI LANKA**

**Whereas the recent escalation in violence in Sri Lanka has left many civilians trapped in the war-zone resulting in untold humanitarian catastrophe, be it resolved that the Association of Sri Lankan Graduates of Canada (ASGC) request the Sri Lankan government to:**

- Lift the embargo on food, medicine and other essential items flowing to the affected areas immediately,
- Stop the indiscriminate blanket bombing and shelling of civilian areas.

**It is further resolved that "ASGC" request the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to:**

- Cease fighting immediately,
- Negotiate without any pre-conditions to work towards a permanent and lasting solution,
- Allow the local and international non-governmental organizations and other humanitarian workers to provide much needed assistance to several hundred thousands of people trapped in war-torn areas,
- Allow access to independent media so that there is a free flow of unbiased and truthful information,
- Allow civilians to live and to move freely to areas of their choice without any restrictions.

**It is also resolved to urge the Government of Canada which has played historical role as peace keeper around the world to use its good office to:**

- take the leadership role and work with the United Nations and other Nations with all possible means available to convince both parties to resolve the crisis,
- If required, contribute towards a Peace Keeping force in the North and East regions of Sri Lanka to monitor the progress of a negotiated settlement,
- Assist in rehabilitation and Reconstruction of the North and East regions with unbiased supervision.

## Addendum "B"

**AS PROUD TAMIL CANADIANS SERVING THE TAMIL CANADIAN COMMUNITY FOR OVER TWENTY YEARS, WE WISH TO PRESENT THE ISSUES OF DISCRIMINATION THAT FORCED MANY TAMILS TO FLEE FROM SRI LANKA TO CANADA SINCE 1983. THE CURRENT SITUATION IN SRI LANKA IS RAPIDLY DETERIORATING, AND WE ARE IN URGENT NEED OF YOUR HELP.**

History indicates there were two separate kingdoms on the island (one Sinhalese and one Tamil), before colonial Britain conquered both and established one unified rule for administrative purposes. When independence was given in 1948, the British left the island as a secular state and with English as the administrative language—which crossed linguistic barriers to unite the entire country. However, in 1956 the majority made their language, Sinhalese, the only official language and retracted minority rights. The Sinhalese made these drastic changes to redress what they felt were unfair acts by the British; they felt that under British rule Tamils had better access to education and were given a larger portion of the government jobs despite the Tamils being a smaller proportion of the population. The Sinhalese wanted to reverse this and assert their dominance as the majority.

In 1961, a law was passed requiring all government employees to learn Sinhalese or relinquish the right to promotions in jobs. Due to this law, thousands of Tamils were forced to take early retirement or resign.

In 1971, a system of standardization of marks was introduced for admission to the universities. For example, in the medical faculty, if the qualifying average for Tamil students was 250 (out of 400) Sinhalese students had to get only 230 to qualify. Many Tamil students were thus prevented from entering universities.

In 1957, and in the mid 60's and 70's the Sinhalese governments came to agreements with the elected Tamil parties to address the minority issues, but each time covered and unilaterally abrogated the pacts when there was protest from the opposition Sinhalese party and the Buddhist priests.

The country was proclaimed as the Free Sovereign and Independent Republic of Sri Lanka (the name was changed from Ceylon to Sri Lanka) in 1972. Under this constitution, Buddhism also became the official religion of the state, relegating Hindus, Christians and Muslims to second-class citizens. With the new Republican constitution, the language (Sinhala only), religion (state religion as Buddhism), new name (Sri Lanka), the flag (the lion symbolizing the Sinhalese), and the government sponsored settlement of Sinhalese in Tamil areas, the country could now effectively be known as a Sinhalese land.

The Tamil parties collaborated in 1976, formed a united front, fought the 1977 election on one issue—a call for a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka—and won 72% of the votes in the North and 68% in the East (100% of all seats in the Tamil area). But nothing happened. Therein lies the birth of Tamil militancy and the current situation.

One night in 1981, during curfew, it is alleged that the policemen and paramilitary burnt down the biggest Tamil library, the largest repository of Tamil archival material, including Palm leaf manuscripts, scrolls of priceless historical value, works and irreplaceable manuscripts of Tamil philosophers.

Since 1956, thousands of Tamils had to stand by and watch as their houses were set on fire, businesses looted, and relatives burnt to death. This encompasses the three major riots of 1958, 1977 & 1983 and many minor ones, and the Tamils were forced to become refugees in their own land—all because they spoke a different language. The Tamils who fled Sri Lanka are scattered globally, with over 300,000 diaspora (largest outside the subcontinent) in Canada.

The current situation in Sri Lanka begs the involvement of the international community. Please do everything within your power to bring peace to the island, and stop the killing of innocent people.

## Addendum A

L' Association of Sri Lankan Graduates of Canada (l'Association des diplômés sri-lankais du Canada) ont adopté les résolutions suivantes lors d'une réunion tenue dimanche le 8 mars 2009.

### APPORTEZ LA PAIX AUX TAMOULS AU SRI LANKA

L'escalade récente de la violence au Sri Lanka a laissée beaucoup de civiles emprisonnés dans la zone de guerre, ce qui donne lieu à la catastrophe humanitaire incalculable, qu'il soit résolu, l'association des diplômés sri-lankais du Canada (ASGC) demande le gouvernement sri-lankais à:

- Lever l'embargo sur la nourriture, les médicaments et autres articles essentiels aux secteurs affectés;
- Arrêter le bombardement et l'utilisation d'armes à sous-munitions des secteurs désignées civils.

Qu'il soit davantage résolu, l'ASGC demande le gouvernement du Sri Lanka et le LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam):

- Un appel immédiat à un cessez-le-feu;
- Négocier sans aucune condition préalable envers une solution permanente et durable;
- Permettre aux organisations non gouvernementales locales et internationales et à tout groupe humanitaire de fournir l'aide si nécessaire à plusieurs centaines de milliers de personnes prises dans les secteurs déchirés par la guerre;
- Faciliter l'accès des médias indépendants aux secteurs affectés de sorte qu'il y ait une circulation d'information impartiale et véridique;
- Permettre aux civiles de vivre et de se déplacer librement aux secteurs de leur choix sans aucune restriction.

On a également résolu de demander l'assistance au gouvernement Canadien, qui a joué un rôle historique à garder la paix autour du monde, d'employer ses bonnes pratiques pour:

- Initier un solution et de travailler avec les Nations Unies et les autres nations, utilisant tous les moyens disponibles pour convaincre les deux côtés à résoudre la crise;
- S'il y a lieu, contribuer vers une force qui aiderai à maintenir la paix dans les régions nord et est du Sri Lanka afin de surveiller la progression d'un arrangement négocié;
- Aider à la réadaptation et à la reconstruction des régions nord et est avec une surveillance impartiale

## Addendum B

### **EN TANT QUE CANADIENS TAMOULS, FIERS ET SERVANT LA COMMUNAUTÉ TAMOULE CANADIENNE POUR PLUS DE VINGT ANS, NOUS SOUHAITONS PRÉSENTER LES CAS DE DISCRIMINATION QUI ONT FORCÉS PLUSIEURS TAMOULS À SE SAUVER DU SRI LANKA POUR LE CANADA DEPUIS 1983. LA SITUATION ACTUELLE AU SRI LANKA DÉTÉRIORE RAPIDEMENT ET NOUS PRIONS POUR VOTRE AIDE.**

L'histoire indique qu'il y avait deux royaumes séparés sur l'île (un Cinghalais et un Tamoul), avant que la Grande-Bretagne ait colonisée et conquis les deux et ait établi une règle unifiée pour buts administratifs. Quand l'indépendance a été accordée en 1948, les Britanniques ont quittés l'île, l'État était séculaire avec l'anglais comme langue administrative – ce qui a franchi les barrières linguistiques, unifiant l'ensemble du pays. Toutefois, en 1956, la majorité ont fait leur langue, le Cinghalais, la seule langue officielle et les droits des minorités ont été retirés. Les Cinghalais ont fait ces changements radicaux pour réparer ce qu'ils estimaient des actes injustes par les Britanniques; ils ont estimé que, sous la domination britannique, les Tamouls ont eu un meilleur accès à l'éducation et ont été donnés une plus grande partie des emplois de fonctions publiques, malgré le fait que les Tamouls sont une plus petite proportion de la population. Les Cinghalais ont voulu renverser ceci et affirmer leur dominance en tant que majorité.

En 1961, une loi a été passée exigeant de tout les employés de l'État d'apprendre le Cinghalais ou de renoncer leur droit à la promotion de l'emploi. En raison de cette loi, des milliers de Tamouls ont été forcés à prendre une retraite anticipée ou de démissionner.

En 1971, un système de normalisation des notes à l'admission aux universités a été introduite. Par exemple, dans la faculté de médecine, si la moyenne de qualification pour les étudiants Tamouls était 250 (sur 400); les étudiants Cinghalais ont dû obtenir seulement 230. Beaucoup d'étudiants Tamouls ont été ainsi empêchés d'entrer dans les universités.

En 1957, et dans le milieu des années soixante et soixante-dix, les gouvernements Cinghalais ont parvenu à des accords avec les parties Tamoules élues d'aborder les injustices envers les minorités. Mais chaque fois, ils ont unilatéralement abrogé les pactes lorsqu'il y avait des protestations de la partie d'oppositions Cinghalais - les prêtres bouddhistes.

En 1972, le pays a été proclamé comme l'indépendant et souverain République socialiste démocratique du Sri Lanka (le nom a été changé de Ceylan au Sri Lanka). Sous cette constitution, le bouddhisme est également devenu la religion officielle de l'État, reléguant Hindous, Chrétiens et Musulmans à des citoyens de seconde classe. Avec la nouvelle constitution, la langue (Cinghalais seulement), la religion (bouddhisme comme religion d'État), le nouveau nom (Sri Lanka), le drapeau (le lion symbolisant les Cinghalais), et le règlement commandité par le gouvernement d'introduire les Cinghalais dans des secteurs Tamoul, le pays pourrait désormais être connu comme terre de Cinghalais dont les Tamouls ne se reconnaissent plus.

Les parties Tamoules ont collaboré en 1976, ont formé un front uni, ont combattu l'élection de 1977 sur l'appel d'un état Tamoul séparé dans Sri Lanka – et ont gagné 72% des votes dans le nord et 68% dans l'est (100% de tous les sièges dans le secteur tamoul). Mais rien ne s'est produit. Se trouve là-dedans la naissance militantisme Tamoul et de la situation actuelle.

Une nuit en 1981, pendant le couvre-feu, il est allégué que les policiers et le paramilitaire ont brûlé la plus grande bibliothèque Tamoule. La plus grande collection d'archives Tamouls, y compris les manuscrits sur feuilles de palmier, les rouleaux de valeur historique inestimable, les travaux et les écritures de philosophes Tamouls; perdus.

Depuis 1956, des milliers de Tamouls ont dû regarder pendant que leurs maisons étaient placées en feu, les entreprises pillées, et leurs parentés brûlés à la mort. Ceci englobe les trois grandes émeutes principales de 1958, 1977 et 1983. Il y avait de nombreux émeutes mineurs aussi. Les Tamouls ont été forcés à devenir des réfugiés dans leurs propre terre, tout parce qu'ils parlaient une langue différente. Les Tamouls qui se sont sauvés du Sri Lanka se sont dispersés globalement, avec plus de 300, 000 de la diaspora au Canada (la plus grande en dehors du continent).

La situation actuelle au Sri Lanka prie la participation de la communauté internationale. Veuillez s'il vous plaît faire tout dans votre pouvoir pour ramener la paix à l'île, et arrêtez les massacres des personnes innocentes.