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Committed to Human Rights and Community
Development

PRESS RELEASE

Sri Lanka celebrates independence while Tamils struggle for human rights

As Sri Lanka is poised to celebrate the 50th anniversary of independence on 4 February. The Tamil people are distressed that half a century of independence has failed to secure the advancement of all the people in the island. Instead, independence has consistently marginalised the Tamil community resulting in an armed struggle and the quest for autonomy for the Tamil people.

To belong to a community where one is accepted, respected and loved, where one can assume responsibilities and discharge them freely, is a longing, deeply embedded in human nature. These have been denied to the Tamils of Sri Lanka who are a community of people, whose members are bound together by a heritage, culture and political consciousness.

The fact that the independence celebrations had been arranged before the Dalada Maligawa, a Buddhist temple and not at a place where all communities would appreciate, is ample testimony to the alienation of the Tamil people.

Destruction of the distinct identity of the Tamil people has been the pre-eminent concern of the Sri Lankan state as manifested through government policies and practices at all times. Since independence, the Tamil community has been the victim of open discrimination, often through legislation, in all spheres of national life, willfully deprived by successive governments of the ingredients for political, social and economic advancement. Tamils have been denied opportunities for education and employment and their lands taken away by government planned and organised Sinhalese settlements. Governments have abused power constantly by using state machinery and the law to deny the Tamils their inalienable rights.

Since independence over 60,000 Tamils have been killed in genocidal massacres often inspired by the government and in recent times the government has had no reluctance in bombing and shelling populated areas and cultural and religious monuments, but has sought to justify the atrocities.

Thousands of Tamils are held in detention without trial for several years and international human rights agencies have time and again provided evidence of torture of Tamils in custody. Despite the ruling of the Sri Lankan Supreme Court in a number of torture cases, the government has not seen fit to charge security force personnel and state officers responsible for torture. Thousands of Tamils have disappeared while in custody, placing Sri Lanka at the top of the list for disappearances. Only three days before the independence celebrations, on 1 February, the police

in Trincomalee massacred eight young Tamils. Amnesty International says this incident is reminiscent of the killing two years ago of 24 civilians, including 13 children in the same area and still the suspects have not been punished. Amnesty also says the police are pressurising families to sign statements saying that the victims were members of the LTTE or they were killed by the LTTE.

The present government has failed, despite repeated promises to the international community, to bring those responsible for atrocities to book, thus encouraging impunity and continued violence against the Tamil community. The commissions and committees appointed by the government have neither provided reprieve to the Tamils nor halted human rights violations against them.

Over 500,000 Tamils have fled the country fearing persecution and over 700-000 Tamils have been uprooted and are internally displaced. sufferings, without proper shelter, adequate food, medicine and fuel, as the government continues to impose economic sanctions on the people as a weapon of war in breach of the Geneva Conventions.

The Plantation Tamils have undergone immense suffering by the deprivation of citizenship and franchise rights and majority of them still suffer the ignominy of second class citizenship under Sri Lankan Laws and live in appalling conditions denied of facilities that are available to others.

The intensity and participation of security forces has been increasing with time and violence has now reached genocidal proportions. Communal tension, brutal civil war and insecurity of the Tamils continue to remain as the dominant issues when Sri Lanka is poised to celebrate 50th anniversary.

While appreciating the circumstances under which the international community is participating in the celebrations, the Tamil Information Centre urges the international community to safeguard the peaceful existence of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka without intimidation by the state and to protect their human rights so that they may freely choose their future destiny, whether in integration, autonomy or preservation of their cultural heritage in a manner they choose.

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