Victims of War exhibition in Geneva

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Our record of civilian casualties is the best in the world of forces fighting terror: Minister Bathiudeen says at the opening ceremony A Photographic Exhibition titled Victims of the War was inaugurated on 21 April 2009 by Hon. Rishad Bathiudeen, Minister of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services at the Centre International de Conferences Geneve (CICG) in Geneva, Switzerland. The exhibition is being held from 21st to 24th April and is organised by the Media Unit of the Presidential Secretariat and the Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the United Nations in Geneva.

Hon Minister Rishad Bathiudeen addressed the gathering comprising Sri Lankan expatriate and foreign invitees. H.E. Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka, Ambassador/Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka to the UN Geneva, Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary to the Ministry of Human Rights and Disaster Management and Mr. Yasantha Kodagoda, Deputy Solicitor General, AGA’s Department also spoke on the occasion which was followed by a reception. Given below is the full text of the speech made by Hon Rishad Bathiudeen, Minister of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services, at the Opening Ceremony of the exhibition. I am honoured to represent the government of Sri Lanka today in declaring open this Exhibition. It has come here to Switzerland on a momentous day, which sees the release of tens of thousands of civilians who had suffered entrapment by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. This Exhibition records the sheer evil of that movement. Though Sri Lanka had political problems, for which solutions could have been found earlier, it is a fact that, from 1987 onward, solutions were brutally rejected by a movement that saw totalitarian power as its only goal. The victims of this terror were manifold. They included hundreds killed by a range of terrorist attacks. They included politicians, predominantly Tamil ones, not only those who tried to work with the government for democratic solutions, but even other militants who seemed to challenge the monopoly the Tigers desired. They included also thousands of my fellow Muslims in the North, who were callously driven out of homes they had occupied for generations, when the Tigers engaged in the only instance of attempted ethnic cleansing in Sri Lanka. My people were victims of that wicked deed in 1990, and it is a mark of the one-sided approach of the controls exercised by the Tigers that no one seemed to care. Sri Lankan politicians dreaming of accommodation with the Tigers did not work on our behalf, the so-called international community that is now concerned about rapid return ignored us for nearly two decades. It is only this government that finally decided we needed support, and began working on durable solutions. This was possible because this government, when faced with absolute LTTE intransigence, with relentless terrorist attacks during what was supposed to be a ceasefire Agreement, with continuing procurement of weapons, with two massive stealthy assaults on military installations, decided that enough was enough. Peace had to be discussed with sane politicians, not megalomaniacs. Our peace process continues, but we have now dealt with terrorism the way it should be dealt with. Certainly we should always give people a chance, but this chance cannot continue at the expense of the innocent, whose suffering you see in this Exhibition. Of course we cannot be sure that terrorism has been quelled. We need to keep working on that, and also on ensuring, through political reforms, that terror will never more find a breeding ground in Sri Lanka. But we should also point out that the spectacular rejection by the Tamil people of terrorism is something the world should note and admire. For over the last nine months a sinister and evil plot was hatched, and sadly this seemed to have the passive acquiescence, if not support, of members of the international community who claim to be concerned with humanitarian problems. Instead of displaying humanitarian concern however, there was a stunning silence as the LTTE drove Tamil civilians into ever shrinking spaces, just as there had been silence in the past despite the break up of families, child conscription and forced labour. There was no recognition of the fact that our record with regard to civilian casualties was the best in the world of forces fighting terror. There was no recognition of the fact that the LTTE took to firing from the start into safe zones we had declared. There was no acknowledgment of the fact that thousands came to safety, but in no instance was there even an allegation that we had harmed those coming to us. And there was far too little acknowledgment of the fact that the LTTE was keeping these people by force, shooting at them as they sought to escape, exploding bombs in the midst of queues of women and children seeking refuge with us. We knew the LTTE was intransigent but nevertheless we twice instituted what were termed humanitarian pauses. The UN was an honourable exception, but there was otherwise little acknowledgment that the LTTE, far from letting people go, used such pauses to entrench their control. Instead of such acknowledgment we had shriller calls for a Ceasefire, which all experience showed would have been used by the LTTE to further the torment of our fellow Tamil citizens. Now that we have succeeded in liberating many of them with minimal bloodshed, when the largest number of casualties amongst those escaping are because of LTTE suicide bombs, we hope the world will acknowledge and salute the heroism of our forces. Suffering much greater casualty figures than before, they nevertheless held back for the sake of the civilians the LTTE was so ruthlessly using. We do not expect apologies from those whose demands would have led to further suffering for these civilians. But we do expect at least now some understanding that we know what is best for our people, and that our commitment to all our citizens will not waver. We owe it to them, and to the memory of all those who have suffered so much from terror, those victims to whom this Exhibition is dedicated. And we hope those who have been so blindly critical of our humanitarian efforts will at least now understand that you cannot compromise with terror if you care about the welfare and the lives of ordinary citizens.