
“Some who oppose talks with Taliban, propose talks with Tigers! ”

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Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the UN in Geneva briefs Swiss press on Sri Lankan situation The Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the United Nations Office in Geneva, in collaboration with the Geneva Press Club - Club suisse de la presse –, organised a press conference on the topic of the ‘Current Situation in Sri Lanka’, on 24 April 2009 at ‘la pastorale,’ Geneva. Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary to the Ministry of Human Rights and Disaster Management and Secretary General, Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process, and Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka, Ambassador/Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka to the United Nations Office in Geneva were the two main speakers at this press meeting.

At the outset, Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha explained the events that took place from 2002 to 2005, providing a brief sketch of the situation. Briefing the gathering on the political means to address the issues that the government has proposed before, during and after the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA), Prof. Wijesinha outlined the key incidents that took place during the CFA. He said that while there had been only about 350 recorded violations by the government, the LTTE had violated the CFA about 3800 times. After the election of H.E. Mahinda Rajapakse, President of Sri Lanka, despite the government’s efforts to politically negotiate a settlement, the LTTE not only walked away from the peace talks but also launched two major attacks in the North and East and also attempted to kill the army commander of Sri Lanka using a pregnant suicide bomber. The government then launched its military offensive in the East and liberated the East from the LTTE in 2007. An ex-LTTE cadre, who had been recruited as a child soldier and had become the leader of a political party formed after a group of fighters broke away from the LTTE in 2004, was made the chief minister of the eastern province after a democratic election. Prof. Wijesinha maintained that despite the fact that the government has launched 400 air strikes until December, only 78 civilian casualties were reported. He further elaborated and said that major civilian casualties were from the LTTE. Prof. Wijesinha also highlighted as extremely helpful, the visit to Sri Lanka by Mr. Walter Kalin, Representative of the UN Secretary General on Human Rights of IDPs which took place in early April. With the help of the ICRC the government and the LTTE allowed the elderly, sick and wounded civilians to be transported to the government controlled areas. Nevertheless, the LTTE prevented a large number of civilians from moving into the government controlled areas. As the military engagements progressed and the government troops continued advancing on the LTTE, the latter, as they were retreating, took the civilians along with them. Even then, around 30,000 civilians escaped and came to those areas controlled by the government in January 2009. In the second week of April, taking in to consideration the suffering of the civilians, the government declared a pause in fighting so that the civilians could come out of the fighting area. During this time, as in the past, LTTE built a wall around the area that they were holding on to in order to prevent the civilians from escaping. This was confirmed and criticized by the UN. Sir John Holmes, Head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, who said that the LTTE was very active in preventing civilians from crossing the area of fighting to the no fire zone. In the latter part of April, the government troops were able to destroy the wall built by the LTTE, which allowed the entrapped civilians to escape into the government controlled areas. Since last week, 110,000 civilians have come out of the LTTE controlled areas. The government has been taking measures to address the welfare and well-being of these civilians. Prof. Wijesinha also praised the efforts of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Programme (WFP), both of whom have helped the government to put up shelters and provide food to these civilians in great numbers. Local NGOs have also been very helpful in providing food for these escaped civilians. Several local NGOs are providing lunch for the civilians in the camps, while the WFP and the government are providing them with the other two meals. Last week there was another major development when two LTTE intellectuals who were members of the LTTE political wing, surrendered to the government. According to them, there remain only about 20,000 civilians with the LTTE. After this initial briefing, questions were called for. A journalist from AFP asked how accurate the figures of civilians coming out of the LTTE area are. Prof. Wijesinha said that so far around 200,000 civilians have escaped and come to government controlled areas. Certain people estimate the number of civilians held by the LTTE to be 400,000, but this is due to double counting. A journalist from Le Temps, a Geneva based news paper asked whether the government will take revenge when refugees and ex-soldiers of the LTTE come to government controlled areas. Prof. Wijesinha replied that around 3000 of those who have surrendered to the Sri Lankan armed forces have said that they had been fighting against the government for the LTTE, and that these former LTTE cadres have been directed to legal authorities. Only 32 out of these were proved to be strong LTTE fighters and they have been sent to rehabilitation camps. Most of the other cadres were underage children who had been forcefully recruited by the LTTE. Addressing the issue of civilians crossing into government controlled areas, while acknowledging that families are divided, Prof. Wijesinha highlighted that the process of reuniting families in the camps, though initially slow, has sped up and has been successful. A journalist from the AFP asked whether there will be a humanitarian pause to allow the civilians to come out. Ambassador Dayan Jayatilleka said that such a pause was not necessary and that the facts speak for this. He pointed out that already without such a pause, 180,000 civilians have escaped from the LTTE held area. Dr. Jayatilleka further pointed out that if there is a pause in fighting, the LTTE will only use it to launch attacks on the armed forces and escaping civilians. Highlighting further atrocities committed by the LTTE, Dr. Jayatilleka highlighted that the LTTE have already launched two suicide attacks on civilians trying to escape and built a wall around their stronghold to prevent people from crossing. In addition, they have also seized the food rations sent by the government and resold them to destitute civilians held by them. Therefore, Dr. Jayatilleka emphasized that what is needed is not a humanitarian pause but a surgical military operation, similar to that carried out by the armed forces a few days ago, to liberate these civilians from the clutches of the LTTE. Prof. Wijesinha also evoked the conflict in Angola and said that after the leader was killed, the terrorist movement died and it fell in to place. Ambassador Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka said that it is important to understand the nature of the LTTE. He quoted Pulitzer

Prize winner John F. Burns, who said that Prabhakaran is the Pol Pot of South Asia. Barbara Crossette of New York Times has also said that the LTTE is the most lethal and totalitarian contemporary armed movement in Asia. The LTTE is a fanatical movement like Al Qaeda and with such movements, humanitarian pauses will not work. Ambassador Jayatilleka said that Sri Lanka is partially dismayed but also partially amused by the fact that certain countries who are against talking to Taliban have suggested that the government should talk to the LTTE, an internationally banned terrorist organization. The Security Council has clearly said that the LTTE should lay down arms. The Tigers have a clear cut record of rearming themselves during a ceasefire. Since 1985, the LTTE did not accept any peaceful solution. During the Indo-Lanka accord, the LTTE did not accept the peaceful solutions presented by the Governments of India and Sri Lanka. Instead, they started fighting with the Indian Peace Keeping Forces. In 1987, a proposal was made to grant provincial autonomy to the North and East through a provincial council system. At the same time, about 70,000 troops of the Indian Peace Keeping force were deployed in northern Sri Lanka. Due to this, the Sri Lankan forces were confined to the barracks while the Indian Army was maintaining the security and the peace in the North and the East. Without accepting the political solution proposed through the Indo-Sri Lanka peace accord, LTTE fought the Indian peace keepers. In 1991, in Tamil Nadu, an LTTE suicide cadre blew herself up and killed the then Indian Prime Minister, Shri Rajiv Gandhi, grandson of Nehru, first Prime Minister in India and the son of Indira Gandhi. In 1990, President Premadasa engaged in direct talks with the LTTE and 14 meetings were convened. In 1993, President Premadasa was blown up by an LTTE suicide attack. After that, President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga was elected and she exchanged 45 letters with the leader of the LTTE. In 1999, an LTTE suicide bomber attempted to kill President Chandrika and left her blinded in one eye. Ambassador Jayatilleka further said that LTTE not only killed leaders of the government but also killed their own community members. Anita Pratap, a journalist and the author of *The Island of Blood*, who was a sympathizer of the LTTE, interviewed Mr. Prabhakaran in 1990s. She requested from the LTTE to see Mahaththaya, deputy leader of the LTTE, who was at that time in the custody of the LTTE. A weakened and demoralized Mahaththaya was shown to Ms. Pratap, who asked from Mr. Prabhakaran as to why Mahaththaya was being punished and Prabhakaran told her that it was because he had been too soft when negotiating with President Premadasa. Later in 1994, Mahaththaya was killed by the LTTE. A question was asked how the surgical military operation would bring a solution to the problem. Ambassador Dayan Jayatilleka said that this is the best available option. The armed forces sliced in to the territory held by the LTTE in order to allow the trapped civilians to escape the LTTE and come to the area controlled by the government. However, he added, the operation may not have been perfect, although the forces did their best. The journalist of *Le Temps* asked the two speakers what they could say about the great numbers of Tamils protesting in the streets. Ambassador Dayan Jayatilleka said that the LTTE is not the sole representative of the Tamil community. They have killed all the moderate Tamils, to name a few, Neelan Thiruchelvam and Rajini Thiranyagama, who followed the footsteps of her elder sister Nirmala Rajasingham. Nirmala Rajasingham has written an article criticizing these Tamil demonstrations in favour of the LTTE. Rajini's two daughters who are studying in Oxford and Cambridge are still traumatized by their mother's death because they heard the LTTE gunshot that killed their mother, who was on her way home from the University. Rajini was a medical doctor who had a PhD and who fought against the army, LTTE and the Indian peace keeping forces. If the protestors who lead comfortable lives in Western countries, are genuinely concerned about the welfare of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka, they should demand that the LTTE release the sick, hungry and wounded civilians that they are forcibly holding. Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha said that not only the UNHCR and WFP, but also local and international NGOs are present in the camps and liberated areas. As already mentioned, these NGOs are providing mid day meals to the refugees. Hon. Minister Douglas Devananda, who has been targeted 13 times to be assassinated by the LTTE, addressed the Durban Review conference last week. He lost the sight in one of his eyes due to an attack by the LTTE. While addressing the Conference, the Hon. Minister said the following: "Although over 70, 000 of those held initially succeeded in getting away, despite being shot at by the LTTE as they escaped, there are still a large number held in captivity. Yet even as I speak today, thousands managed to get away to refuge with the government. If the international community can pressurize the LTTE to surrender or at least to release the rest of these civilians unconditionally, that will go a long way in ending the suffering of the Tamil minority." Prof. Wijesinha also said that he had been appealing to the UN to publicly state that the LTTE was taking civilians as hostages from September 2008. But the UN, even though they knew it was happening, did not say it openly because they were afraid that the UN staff and their families may be harmed by the LTTE. However, in November, the UN at last acknowledged that the LTTE was taking civilians as hostages. Although the government appreciates this late action by the UN, it feels that the call to release the civilians by the UN should have made much earlier. The Sri Lankan government admires the encouragement given by the Japanese government. The Japanese government asked the LTTE to surrender, while asking the government to continue its military operation of zero civilian casualties, which they openly hailed. Dr. Edward Perera, a member of the Sri Lankan diaspora asked what the speakers' opinion was on the Bishop of Jaffna's comparison of the LTTE leader to Jesus. Both Ambassador Jayatilleka and Prof. Wijesinha said that the Bishop of Jaffna has not supported terrorism and that they are not aware of his making such a comparison. They queried the sources of the alleged statement. Referring to the incidents happened in 1981 and 1983, Prof. Wijesinha said that he will not try to defend such indefensible incidents which were backed by certain elements in the Government of the time. However, what is important to keep in mind is that such incidents have not been repeated ever since. Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the United Nations Geneva

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