

Press Release – June 19, 2008

Good afternoon and thank you for attending this very important event.

My name is Sitha Sittampalam and I was the President of the World Tamil Movement - Ontario (WTM) until several days ago. Alongside me is Marlys Edwardh from the law firm of Ruby & Edwardh who has been retained by the WTM to act as its legal counsel, and her colleague Adriel Weaver. We have also retained Barbara Jackman of the law firm Jackman and Associates to act as co-counsel, but she is unfortunately unable to be here today.

As you are all aware, the Minister of Public Safety, Mr. Stockwell Day announced this past Monday that the World Tamil Movement had been added to the list of terrorist entities under the *Criminal Code of Canada*.

The Board of Directors of the WTM, the thousands of Tamil Canadians who have benefitted from the services provided by the WTM, and the Tamil Canadian community at large are profoundly

shocked and dismayed by the decision of the Government of Canada to criminalize a community-based organization in this manner.

Over the past several days, there has been much misinformation spread about the nature and activities of the WTM. Let me take this opportunity to clarify today what WTM does and what it stands for.

The WTM was incorporated in Ontario in 1986 as a non-profit corporation, and over the past 22 years has provided much needed settlement, counselling, and cultural services to tens of thousands of Tamil Canadians. An estimated 200,000 Tamil Canadians live in the Greater Toronto Area, the vast majority of whom came to Canada as refugees fleeing persecution based on ethnicity by the Sri Lankan government over the past 20 years.

WTM diligently served the settlement and integration needs of Tamil newcomers, assisting them to establish new lives in Canada while maintaining ties to their cultural community. Over the years, the WTM has offered a variety of programs and services, including document translation, interpretation, language and vocational training, Tamil

language and culture classes for children, a Women's organization to address the particular needs of women newcomers, a 16,000-volume library, sports leagues, and cultural celebrations. The WTM is staffed and funded entirely by volunteers.

As a result of the listing, these important services will no longer be provided to the Tamil Canadian community by the WTM. The WTM has decided to vacate the premises at 39 Consentino Drive, and the Board of Directors will be suspending its operations. Effective immediately, all services will cease and the 1600 volume library will be closed to the public.

It is no secret that the World Tamil Movement supports the right of the Tamil people to self-determination in the North and Eastern part of Sri Lanka. This is a political position – perhaps one that not everyone will agree with, but one that we are constitutionally entitled to hold. Many of us came to Canada precisely because this country safeguards the right of everyone to hold and express their own opinions.

These rights are unfortunately not equally recognized in Sri Lanka. It is our belief that the listing of the World Tamil Movement will encourage the Sri Lankan government – which has been repeatedly chastised by the United Nations and international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International for its dismal human rights record – to continue to use violence and intimidation to stifle dissent.

Rather than criminalizing community organizations in Canada, the government could better direct its efforts to promoting peace in Sri Lanka and providing humanitarian assistance for those displaced by the ongoing conflict.

We believe this act is the first step on a slippery slope, where all of our fundamental rights and freedoms can be eroded. We see the listing as a political move intended to silence a voice within the Tamil diaspora. The entire community feels tarnished and threatened by this announcement. After the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were listed in April 2006, there was significant backlash against members of the Tamil Canadian community, many of whom

experienced discriminatory treatment in schools, workplaces and in the general public. There is a concern amongst Tamil Canadians that this listing will have a more profoundly negative impact on the community at large.

We are grateful for the overwhelming support we have received from Tamil Canadians of all stripes. Their response, and ours, is that we will not be silenced.

The Board of the World Tamil Movement has therefore instructed its counsel to vigorously challenge the listing, which we view as an attack on the fundamental freedoms of expression and association enshrined in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. We have full confidence in the Canadian legal system to uphold the constitution, and will diligently pursue all legal remedies available.

Thank you all for taking the time to be here this afternoon.

Sitha Sittampalam