



1 April 2009

'Global Appeal' Launch Event for the 'Mercy Mission to Vanni' - M.I.A., celebrities and MPs turn out to show support

The 'Global Appeal' for the "Mercy Mission to Vanni" ([Vanangaman -Vanni Mission](#)), an awareness and fund raising event, was held Tuesday, 31st March 2008 from 1pm - 4pm at The Royal Horseguards, Whitehall Place in London, UK. The event, attended by MPs, celebrities, and the media, was held to raise awareness of the humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka and inform the public of the 'Mercy Mission to the Vanni' being sponsored by *Act Now* and a number of Tamil charities and community organisations, including White Pigeon, Tamil Health Organisation, Tamil Aid, Tamil Schools Sports Association, Technical Association of Tamils and the Tamil Support Foundation. At the end of the event the Hindu Temples Group (UK) pledged to donate £200,000 to the mission, a cheque for £50,000 was handed over at the event and the remainder will be raised from their devotees over the next two weeks.

Tim Martin of [ACT NOW](#), a UK based organisation, opened the proceedings with an impassioned description of his work in the Vanni during times of peace and times of war. He described the current humanitarian situation and the desperate need for this mercy mission.

He pointed out that, *"The figures in Sri Lanka are not so different to the Congo which captures the international media's attention and yet with Sri Lanka the world is not acting."* He added that, *"Dr. T. Varatharajah, the Regional Director of Health Services, in the region where the conflict is taking place, says the last major medical facility in Tamil-held territory has almost stopped functioning due to a shortage of medicine, he says the closure of the hospital would put the lives of thousands of sick and injured people in the conflict zone at extreme risk."*

He also condemned NGOs for keeping silent so that they can be part of the 'post-war' reconstruction projects. He said, *"I am deeply sickened that humanitarian organisations could do this; it just goes to show they are nothing more than businesses and the Tamil people will not forget their silence."*

Furthermore he conveyed the immense pressure he has had to endure for speaking up for the rights of Tamils in Vanni.

A short video depicting the humanitarian conditions in the so-called 'safe zone' was shown to the audience. **Arjunan Ethirveerasingam**, a volunteer for the mission, provided commentary for the video and an update of the current humanitarian situation facing the people in Vanni. *"There are severe shortages of food and medicine in the "safe zone" due to restrictions imposed by the Government of Sri Lanka. The ICRC and the UN have told us that there are adequate amounts of food and medicine in Colombo and other government controlled areas, but the problem they face is that the government and the Sri Lanka Ministry of Defence refuse to grant permission for adequate amounts of these humanitarian supplies to be transported to the so-called 'safe zone'. This is the reason that we are launching this 'Global Appeal' for support for the mission and for permission from the SL President to allow this ship to land and deliver it's desperately needed humanitarian cargo. This mission will be completely transparent and invites the presence of the international media, monitors and any others who wish to inspect the ship to join us on the voyage."*

M.I.A. (Mathangi "Maya" Arulpragasam), was, sadly, unable to attend the ceremony but released the following statement in support of the Vanni Mission, it was read out at the function by Mrs. Manjula Gugesan, a member of her extended family:

"I just had a baby last month, that's why I can't be there today, but I want to give my support and thanks to the launch of the chartered humanitarian ship Mercy Mission launching March 31, 2009.

I made it out in the late 80's and so my baby is going to grow up with hospitals, healthcare, food, free education, freedom of speech and religion, a life expectancy of 80-90 years and many of the liberties that we in democratic world take for granted.



A baby born in the Vanni Region today is getting no access to hospitals (they bombed the last one and it's run out of supplies.) There is limited food because the government banned the aid agencies and there is no education because the trapped civilians only have one option and that is to make it to the government-run internment camps where they only enforce the language and ideas of the government. The Tamils have less rights than the animals in Sri Lanka.

The Mercy Mission will carry dry food and medicines for Tamil civilians in Vanni within the Sri Lankan Government's "safe zone." Many have already perished from starvation and preventable disease. We can not ignore these genocidal conditions, and if the aim of the SL Government is to protect the lives of the civilians, then this ship will reach its destination and lives will be saved.

Thank you very much"

- Maya Arulpragasam (M.I.A.)

Sian Evans, of the band "Kosheen", did not let her recent knee operation stop her from attending the event and showing her support. *"I hope that at very best our efforts will send hope,"* she stated prior to signing the petition letter to the President of Sri Lanka.

Lee Scott MP, Conservative Party Member of Parliament for Ilford North, who had also attended the inauguration of the food and medicine collection for Vanangaman in his constituency, offered his support once again for the Mercy Mission and said that, *"All people have the right to live their lives in peace and with dignity, wherever they are"*. As a Jew, he stated that it was important that the atrocities faced by his people should never be allowed to happen again.

Other celebrities who signed the scroll petition letter to the President of Sri Lanka included fashion models **Jade Parfitt**, **Jasmine Guinness** and **Deborah Leng**.

Stephen Pound MP, Labour Party Member of Parliament for Ealing North, in his address said *"It's like standing outside a house on fire and not being able to get inside to pour water over it... but now we have the opportunity to do something"*. He said that the mission had great symbolic value, connecting the community here to the people in the Vanni. Mr Pound said *"We cannot allow genocide to take place before our very eyes"*. He expressed his sorrow in having to refer to ethnic cleansing in this day and age, *"It is slow motion warfare against its people, mainly children, the old, the sick, the maimed"*. He went on to say, *"This ship takes with it not just supplies, not just our hopes.... but it lets the people in Vanni know that they will not be forgotten"*.

Jeremy Corbyn MP Labour Party Member of Parliament for Islington North, who has been involved with and following the war in Sri Lanka since 1983, said, *"What we're witnessing is a humanitarian disaster of appalling proportions... There has to be a political solution."*

Other speakers included Conservative Party Member of Parliament for Orpington **John Horam MP**, Conservative Party Member of Parliament for Croydon Central **Andrew Pelling MP**, **Pathmini Sithamparanathan MP** (Tamil National Alliance-SL), **Mayor Cllr Eliza Mann** and Director of *Act Now* Graham Williamson.

Longstanding supporters of the British-Tamil's **Keith Vaz MP**, **Joan Ryan MP** and **Siobhain McDonagh MP**, all of the Labour Party, also attended the event and signed the petition letter to the Sri Lankan President.

John McDonnell MP Labour Party Member of Parliament for Hayes and Harlington praised the initiative undertaken by the Tamil Diaspora and said that the wider community has begun to wake up to the atrocities taking place in Sri Lanka. He also acknowledged that while the mission of mercy was a wonderful way of assisting the humanitarian crisis, it was equally important that adequate political pressure be applied, and noted that the British Government had to fulfil its responsibilities in doing so.



Jonathan Fryer, writer, broadcaster, and Liberal Democrat European Parliament Candidate for London spoke of his experiences of being in Sri Lanka during the 1983 riots. *“I saw buildings going up in flames around me... I saw Tamils being attacked on the streets... Quarter of a century later, the problems have not been solved”*.

Kieran Arasaratnam, a young British-Tamil investment banker, who arrived in the UK as a child refugee, spoke of his experiences at the hands of the Sri Lanka Army and announced his plan to climb Mount Kilimanjaro while the ship sailed to the Mullaitivu Coast. All of the funds pledged and raised during the climb will be donated to the “Mission of Mercy”. In his moving speech, which brought tears to some of those in the audience, he spoke of his motivation, the treatment he and his family experienced for taking on this challenge and encouraged others to do whatever they could.

The Mercy Mission Coordinating Committee plans to circulate the scroll and the petition letter throughout the UK, the rest of Europe, the US, Canada, Australia and on the internet in order to allow more celebrities, political leaders, and the general public to sign the petition.

The text of the petition letter to the President of Sri Lanka:

TO HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT OF SRI LANKA,

News of the catastrophic humanitarian crisis affecting hundreds of thousands of civilians in the conflict affected Vanni region of Northern Sri Lanka has been filtering out through the UN, international humanitarian and human rights organisations and the ICRC in recent weeks.

As your Excellency is no doubt aware, civilians in the region are in desperate need of assistance as the last functional temporary hospital in the designated 'safe zone' has officially been forced to close due to a lack of medicine and medical supplies. Additionally, food supplies are not available in adequate quantities to support the current population.

Therefore, the international community has supported a Mission of Mercy ship carrying a consignment of food, medicine, medical teams and other essential items to the suffering civilians in the conflict affected region of northern Sri Lanka.

We appeal to your humanitarian conscience to allow this aid to be delivered, without hindrance or restraint.

Furthermore, we the undersigned appeal to you to agree to an immediate ceasefire and to ensure that an adequate amount of humanitarian assistance be permitted into the conflict area where it can be distributed to those devastated by the conflict.

- ENDS -

* This Press Statement is on behalf of the “Mercy Mission to Vanni” Coordinating Committee which is comprised of Act Now and a number of Tamil charities and community organizations, including White Pigeon, Tamil Health Organisation (THO), Tamil Aid, Tamil Schools Sports Association (TTSF), Technical Association of Tamils (TAOT) and the Tamil Support Foundation (TSF).

www.act-now.info
www.vannimission.org