



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

ADJOURNMENT

Sri Lanka

SPEECH

Thursday, 4 February 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Murphy, John, MP

Source House
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Mr MURPHY (Lowe) (4.35 pm)—Today is the 62nd anniversary of Independence Day in Sri Lanka. However, the Tamils on the island will not be celebrating—indeed, the Tamil diaspora around the world mourn as they believe today marks the beginning of national oppression. On 4 February 1948, when independence was granted by the British government, arrangements were not made to secure political stability through a power-sharing agreement between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority. Due to this failing, the minority Tamil community were repeatedly discriminated against and brutally oppressed. The Tamils sought non-violent means of action, engaging in political campaigning for federalism through constitutional and parliamentary means. However, the Tamil community report that the vocalisation of their desire for self-determination led to a violent reaction from the Sri Lankan government resulting in a bloody 26-year civil war.

On 29 May, the government declared victory with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam. The end of the war resulted in some 300,000 internally displaced persons being forced into government camps. Heavy military artillery and shelling obliterated homes and schools as well as hospitals. In a United Nations report, it is estimated that in the last stages of the civil war 20,000 Tamil civilians were killed, mostly through shelling; 7,000 civilians were killed in the so-called no-fire zone up to the end of April, despite assurances from the Sri Lankan government that they had stopped the use of heavy weapons. On average, a thousand civilians died each day until 19 May 2009.

Despite the Sri Lankan government's declaration of victory, the international community has expressed its grave concern that this battle will not be won and peace will not prevail until the Sri Lankan government provides essential political reform. Unfortunately, the recent re-election of the Sri Lankan President, Mahinda Rajapaksa, has not instilled confidence in a secure future for all Sri Lankans. On the contrary, the Tamil community I represent have raised their serious concerns that the elections were not conducted in good faith. Rather, they believe the elections were brought forward two years to exploit the Sinhala majority in order to gain another six-year term. Further, the Tamil community believes that the voting trend highlights the alarming polarisation between the Tamils and the

Sinhalese, noting that the majority of Tamil-speaking people voted against re-elected President Rajapaksa.

A UNICEF representative presented a report on the current situation in Sri Lanka to senators and members in this House this morning. He confirmed that many Tamils were unable to register to vote at the recent elections. The opposition presidential candidate, General Sarath Fonseka, has also alleged that there were serious violations of electoral law and has requested the electoral commissioner to annul the voting.

The current political and humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka is extremely disturbing. Despite a commitment from the Sri Lankan government to resettle all of the 300,000 internally displaced persons by 31 January this year, the UNICEF representative noted that this has not happened and will be unlikely to occur in the next couple of months. While many people will celebrate Independence Day today in Sri Lanka as I speak, some 90,000 internally displaced persons remain in government camps unable to return to their homes. Landmines and unexploded ordnances are making vast regions too dangerous to access. Others have no homes to return to as they have been destroyed by shelling. Alarmingly, it was also reported by the UNICEF representative this morning that there are currently no mother and child health clinics, no paediatric care and no obstetric services available in the affected areas. While Australian children have just begun their school year, returning to improved or improving learning environments due to federal government funding, many schools in northern Sri Lanka have been reduced to rubble. It is reported that every school that was not destroyed or severely damaged does not have furniture or teaching resources.

The trauma suffered by the men, women and children in northern Sri Lanka, which they continue to experience, is nothing short of horrific. The Australasian Federation of Tamil Associations has continued to raise its request for an independent investigation into the conduct of all parties during the war.

On 16 January this year, in Dublin, the Chairman of the Permanent People's Tribunal, Francois Houtart, delivered the preliminary findings of its two-day hearing in Milan on the war and its aftermath. Evidence

including video footage and eyewitness accounts was presented during the hearing. The people's tribunal found that the Sri Lankan government was guilty of war crimes and guilty of crimes against humanity.

Previously in this House I have called for an independent and thorough international investigation into the reports of violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in Sri Lanka. On the 62nd anniversary of Independence Day in Sri Lanka, I repeat that call for an independent investigation, led by the United Nations, and I demand that the Sri Lankan government cooperate fully with that investigation.