



OFFICIAL STATEMENT BY THE TAMIL REFUGEE COUNCIL

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BISHOP FAILS TO REVEAL FULL TRUTH ON HER SRI LANKA TRIP

Melbourne, Thursday – Opposition Foreign Affairs spokesperson Julie Bishop has given a misleading account of her meeting with Tamil representatives during her visit to Sri Lanka, according to a Tamil MP who spoke to her at length.

Bishop told listeners to ABC Radio's Connect Asia program on Tuesday that she had spoken to Tamil National Alliance MPs, and other Tamil people in the north, where most Tamils live, and had seen or heard no evidence of persecution of Tamils.

"I am certainly heartened by what I see," said Bishop, who last September called for all Sri Lankan asylum seekers to be sent home without assessing their refugee claims, a process which is illegal under the UN Refugee Convention.

A Tamil National Alliance MP Sivagnanam Sritharan said in a Canadian Tamil Radio interview, replayed on Melbourne station 3CR on Wednesday evening, that he had told Bishop during a 90-minute discussion last Monday at his Kilinochchi office that:

Sri Lankan intelligence had raided his office two weeks ago and jailed two of his staff members, who still remain in prison. He gave documents to Bishop about the raid.

#People in the Kilinochchi and surrounding Tamil areas were living in fear, that there was no improvement in their lives and that they were afraid to speak out.

Tamil refugees were fleeing to Australia because they could not live in peace in Sri Lanka.

Tamil villagers visited by Bishop and her party in the Keppapilavu village in the Mullaitivu district, the area where the massacre of at least 40,000 innocent Tamil civilians took place at the end of the civil war in 2009, were afraid to speak to her because Sri Lankan intelligence officers were watching them nearby.

"We also asked the Australians to push for a political solution to the problems our people face in this country," Sritharan said. "They told us reconciliation is the way to go.

"We asked them: Do you see arresting University students under terrorist laws (last month) and sending them to rehabilitation camps as reconciliation?

"Tamils who have been in rehabilitation camps are being re-arrested and placed in jails. Do you see that as reconciliation?

"For many of our questions they maintained a silence. I felt that the intent of their visit was to see how they could stop the Tamil asylum seekers from getting on boats."

Bishop told ABC Radio on Tuesday that Tamils seeking asylum in Australia were not fleeing persecution but were economic migrants. She also said, erroneously, that no Tamil refugees had been sent home by the Australian Government.

“It is evident there is a lot of re-construction underway and genuine attempts at reconciliation (by the Sri Lankan Government),” she said.

Bishop said she had made the trip, along with Immigration Minister Scott Morrison and other officials, to seek the truth. She had visited Tamil regions and asked questions of Tamil politicians and community leaders. She said she was also speaking to Government officials and leaders.

“Clearly, there are claims people fear persecution. We’ve not seen any evidence of it. We’ve asked for details. But none has been forthcoming,” she said

“If Tamils do fear persecution they have options other than through the people smuggling trade, including making claims through the Australian High Commission in Sri Lanka for a humanitarian visa.”

Sritharan explained why Tamil villagers were frightened to speak to Bishop and her entourage.

“Around 3.30pm (on Monday) we took them to Keppapilavu village in Mullaitivu district. They spent about 20 minutes with the villagers, who are living in camps and still to be re-settled (almost four years after war finished.),” he said.

“The people were very scared to speak to the Australians. There was military presence everywhere. You could see Sri Lankan Intelligence people present holding mobile phones. People were very scared and stayed back. They didn’t say a word. You could see in their faces they were frightened.

“We told the Australians this is the reality for Tamils in Sri Lanka.”

The Indian magazine, Economic and Political Weekly, estimated last year that three years after the war there was one soldier for every five civilians in the north of Sri Lanka.

Sritharan said he told Bishop and Morrison about the attack two weeks ago on his offices by Sri Lankan intelligence officers. “We also gave them documents that related to the attacks. I also told them about two of my staff members who have been arrested by the terrorism investigation department and have yet to be released,” Sritharan said.

“We also explained to them about how people in Kilinochchi and surrounding Tamil areas are living in fear. We explained that there has been no improvement in their lives.

“The Australians asked us why Tamil refugees are choosing to come to Australia and not other countries. We made it very clear to them that our people do not have peace. They have to live in fear. They can’t live here.

“Even for me as a politician I am facing many challenges to exercise my rights. Therefore it is very difficult for an average Tamil to live here. Hence they choose to go to Australia, a country that will save lives, that respects human rights.”

Bishop exposed her on-going credibility problems by claiming that no Tamil refugees have been sent back home from Australia.

Her credibility is also under question, given that she failed to mention in the ABC Radio interview any of the details of the discussion with Sritharan and anything he and his colleagues told her party.

Instead she chose to focus only on information that would provide support to the Liberal Party’s tough stance on refugees and its mantra that all Sri Lankan boat people were “economic migrants”, not genuine asylum seekers.

If elected at the September 14 Federal election, The Liberal Party, of which Bishop is deputy leader, has already stated that it will continue the current Australian Government policy of returning refugees and joining with the Sri Lankan Government to stop refugee boats from coming here.

Many countries' leaders, through the United Nations, as well as Tamil leaders and supporters of the Tamil community in Sri Lanka and Australia have expressed grave concerns about on-going persecution of Tamils, a major reason for them pursuing their legal right to seek asylum in Australia.

A UN-commissioned report has also demanded an independent international investigation into war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Sri Lankan Government, which Bishop failed to mention, even though she was touring the war zone in which these massacres of innocent Tamils were committed only three and half years ago.

The UN report also suggests similar crimes may have been committed by the now-defunct Tamil Tigers

On the issue of the Australian Government's treatment of Tamil refugees, Bishop said: "I must point out that no Tamils have been returned by the Australian Government so the issue of their treatment on return (to Sri Lanka) has not arisen."

The Australian Government has conceded that scores of Tamils have been among the 800 or more refugees who have been returned to Sri Lanka. Many have been pictured by international media being led from court to Negombo prison.

One returned Tamil, Krishnan Prytheepan, told the Australian ABC 7.30 report in Colombo last month: "I took the risk of dying at sea because I know I will die here. That would be better than dying in Sri Lanka."

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