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Senator RHIANNON (New South Wales) (18:42): Two years ago, when the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting was being held in Australia, the campaign to stop Sri Lanka hosting the next CHOGM kicked off. This campaign commenced because of concern about the ongoing human rights abuses associated with the Rajapaksa regime in Sri Lanka. Although CHOGM is now being held in Sri Lanka, the call for an international investigation into war crimes and crimes against humanity has been taken up more broadly, and increasing numbers of prime ministers from Commonwealth countries are now not attending the CHOGM event.

It was the Canadian Prime Minister who first took a stand. The Canadian Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, actually walked out of the summit being held in Perth when the Sri Lankan President, Mahinda Rajapaksa, was invited to speak to the assembled leaders. Media reports said that Prime Minister Harper was thinking of boycotting Sri Lanka's meeting if human rights abuses linked to the end of the civil war in 2009 were not investigated. Now we know, because it was reported in October this year, that Prime Minister Harper decided that he would not attend this summit. He cited Sri Lanka's failure to investigate human rights violations during and after the end of the civil war and the continued erosion of democratic freedoms under the government of President Rajapaksa as the reason for his nonattendance.

I was in Sri Lanka last week, and at about the time a New Zealand MP and I were detained by the Sri Lankan immigration authorities the news broke that the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, was also boycotting CHOGM. Since then we have learnt that the Mauritius Prime Minister, Dr Navinchandra Ramgoolam, and also Trinidad and Tobago's Prime Minister, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, will not be attending the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. I think these are brave actions, and it sends a powerful message about the situation in Sri Lanka today. It should also be noted that the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, in the last week has said that while he will attend the summit:

I will raise my concerns when I see President Rajapaksa next week in Colombo. And I will tell him that if Sri Lanka doesn't deliver an independent

investigation, the world will need to ensure an international investigation is carried out instead."

This was shortly after he had watched Channel 4's chilling documentary *No Fire Zone*, which shows horrifying images of war crimes committed by the Rajapaksa government.

This then brings us back to Australia. The determination of the Australian government, first under Labor and now under the coalition, to defend the Sri Lankan government's line that there are no human rights and legal rights abuses taking place in that country is astonishing and is losing credibility. This has been the case since the final stages of the war in 2009, with this unhealthy relationship between our government and the Rajapaksa regime. Four years after the end of the war, even though international human rights organisations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International and media outlets like Britain's Channel 4 and the BBC continue to inform us of acts of torture, rape and crimes against humanity occurring under the rule of President Rajapaksa, Australia still turns a blind eye.

So we have to ask why. The answer, sadly, lies with how this country is treating the asylum seeker issue. What we have seen with Labor and now with the coalition is that they have turned it into an electoral issue. It is about trying to manage what they see as damaging headlines about boats coming here. Instead of showing compassion and abiding by our international obligations, there is an ugly relationship playing out here. Many people I met in Sri Lanka expressed concern and surprise that Australian ministers and shadow ministers who visit their country do not give a fair account of what they are shown and what they hear when they return to Australia. They used to say to me: 'At least it should be balanced. They just ignore what they see when they come to the north.' Many believe that deals have been done between the Sri Lankan government and the Australian government. The Australian government, they believe, does not criticise the Sri Lankan human rights record, and in return Australian officials like those in the Australian Federal Police and ASIO work out of the high commission assisting the Sri Lankan government to stop the boats. I cannot confirm if that deal has been done or what form it takes, but there is certainly that growing perception, which one can understand when

you look at how CHOGM is playing out and how other countries are refusing to stand with President Rajapaksa, smile with him, shake his hand and sit down for talks, as the Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, is about to do.

So it is for all these reasons that I went to Sri Lanka to be the voice the Australian government has refused to be to help amplify the voice that speaks of the horrendous human rights abuses that the Sri Lankan government is involved in—the voice that is part of a growing international call for an independent investigation into the war crimes committed during the brutal civil war in which more than 40,000 Tamils were killed in just five months in 2009. I have campaigned on these issues for many years now, but seeing them firsthand elevated my concerns about the worrying situation so many people live in in that country, particularly the women. I travelled widely and met a range of people, particularly members of parliament, members of provincial councils, religious leaders and community leaders. I am not giving the names of all these people, because after I was detained I became more concerned about people's safety, even though many of the people said they were happy for me to use their names.

One of the Catholic fathers that I met does extensive work on the disappeared people. He has identified 2,301 people who have disappeared. He has found that 90 per cent of these went missing in government-controlled areas in the north and east of Sri Lanka. He explained that there is extensive evidence from photos and videos showing that people who the government said had died in combat were actually alive when they were caught and they were killed after they were captured. One of the church's own priests is still missing. The father gave great emphasis to the need for an independent international investigation into war crimes and crimes against humanity and particularly emphasised the need for a witness protection program to be part of the process. He also explained that crimes that have been committed and those that continue to be perpetrated amount to genocide against the Tamils.

A provincial minister spoke about how the government was failing to implement the recommendations of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission, which the Sri Lankan government set up itself. He raised the point that he and his colleagues are asking how the government will negotiate in good faith with Tamil representatives if it will not implement its own report—a report that many saw as very lacking because so many people would not give evidence to it because they were so fearful, but not even those recommendations have been adopted. The minister explained how insulting many Tamils find the rehabilitation programs, where they have to salute the Sri Lankan flag and are forced

to work on farms that have now been taken over by the army; the profits go to the army. The army runs rehabilitation programs for Tamils, and then it gets paid for these programs by the government. So people thought that whole situation was very compromised in how it was working.

I found the situation that the media operate under particularly concerning. I visited the offices of a newspaper called *Uthayan*. It has been operating since 1985 and has a huge circulation. What I found extraordinary was that in the reception room there are still bullet holes in the wall. I saw the printing press that had been shot up in a night raid. Journalists have been killed. There were tragic photos that I found very disturbing where they have been killed. There were computer hard drives with bullets in them. Some of these attacks occurred earlier this year.

So these are real issues that so many people live with today. The human rights abuses, the failure to follow the rule of law and the violations of media rights continue today. These are issues that our Prime Minister, Mr Tony Abbott, on this visit should be at least speaking to the President of Sri Lanka about. The Senate passed a motion requesting he do that, and I certainly hope that he does it and reports back so we at least see that there is some balance starting to return in the relations between our countries and so we can add our voice to the call for an international independent investigation into war crimes and crimes against humanity in Sri Lanka.