



QUAKER PEACE AND LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

SRI LANKA: WATCHING BRIEF

QPLC – along with other Quaker groups, especially in Britain - has had an ongoing concern about promoting peace in Sri Lanka. This report outlines the activities of the Committee over recent years, and other relevant information about events since the civil war in Sri Lanka officially ended in 2009.

Current Activities

In early 2014 QPLC, following earlier dialogue sessions, decided to set up another dialogue meeting, this time focusing on sharing of stories about Sri Lanka, in order to increase the chance of a conversation based on listening to each other and not giving undue emphasis to political divisions. As a result, on 30 March a meeting was held at the Canberra Meeting House involving 13 participants, 8 of whom were from Sri Lankan background, and 5 Quakers. The outcome was an agreement for an ongoing Forum facilitated by Quakers, to draw in a wider circle of people with experience of, and concern for, Sri Lanka.

Harold Wilkinson and David Purnell then had a meeting with the Sri Lankan High Commissioner, at his request, to report on the outcome of the meeting and to maintain an open invitation for him to attend or be represented at future meetings. This was the second such meeting with the High Commissioner.

Background

In March and September 2010, private meetings were held at the Friends Meeting House, Turner (ACT), to discuss ways in which support for the people of Sri Lanka could be strengthened, and how members of the diaspora might be encouraged to work together to help build peace in Sri Lanka. Those who attended included government representatives, academics, NGOs, Quakers and members of Sri Lanka groups. The meetings highlighted the following points:

- There are many within Sri Lanka who are committed to healing divisions, rebuilding communities, resettling displaced people, and addressing the grievances arising from human rights abuses.
- The views of the diaspora groups around the world tend to be more hardline than their counterparts in the country, who are seeking reconciliation.
- The Australian Government has increased aid and is open to further proposals, but is wary of taking a stronger position against the Sri Lanka Government.

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In December 2010 a follow-up meeting – involving some Quakers from QPLC and some other non-Quakers - agreed to try to find ways of supporting the people of Sri Lanka in the post-war period. The first activity arranged was an exhibition of photographs prepared by Diaspora Lanka – a non-profit organisation led by Jeremy Liyanage committed to help Sri Lanka through business and community links between Australia and Sri Lanka. The exhibition, which included photos of reconstruction in northern parts of Sri Lanka, was displayed at the ACT Legislative Assembly in March 2011. Some valuable publicity resulted, and 70 people attended the launch. Donations were received towards Diaspora Lanka projects in Mannar, Sri Lanka.

Since then several informal meetings have been held with visiting Sri Lankan scholars and politicians. It has not proved easy to get a spread of participants from different parts of the Sri Lankan community in Australia, given the long history of war and trauma within Sri Lanka and the effects upon many who have moved elsewhere.

Political Developments

The Government of Sri Lanka established a special group called Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC). Its final report (December 2011) contained many proposals to reduce tensions and aid reconstruction. Much of the response around the world – notably from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the International Crisis Group - was that this did not go far enough and that the United Nations should create an independent investigation of war crimes in Sri Lanka, as recommended by the UN Secretary's General's panel of experts on accountability in Sri Lanka.

Lack of progress in implementing the LLRC proposals became a source of frustration for many in the international community, and this led to further cautionary resolutions against the Sri Lankan Government at the UN Human Rights Council in 2012 and 2013, and encouraging a greater role for the UN Commissioner for Human Rights in monitoring the situation and offering advice. On 26 March 2014 the latest resolution welcomed the progress made by the Government in rebuilding infrastructure and resettling internally displaced people, and encouraged full participation by local people in resolving problems of justice, reconciliation, and land use. It also urged action by the Sri Lankan Government to address the human rights violations of the past, and authorized the UN Human Rights Commissioner to investigate further.

Jehan Perera from the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, has repeatedly stressed the importance of the Sri Lankan Government responding to international concern by establishing a process to discover the truth about human rights violations and war crimes, and has identified the need for the Government to follow up its acknowledgement that civilian casualties did occur by having an independent enquiry into the last phases of the war.

Australian Role

In December 2011, at the invitation of the Sri Lankan Government, a delegation of Parliamentarians from Australia visited Sri Lanka. They met government officials, members of Parliament, local officials and community representatives. They travelled to the North to witness the reconstruction and reconciliation processes. They were also able to visit Australian-funded aid projects. Members of the delegation were Maria Vamvakinou (ALP), Rowan Ramsey (Lib), Harry Jenkins (ALP), Senator Helen Kroger (Lib), and Dr Andrew Southcott (Lib).

A meeting was held in Parliament House, Canberra, on 29 February 2012, arranged by the Sri Lankan High Commission and the Australia-Sri Lanka Parliamentary Group. On that occasion, the High Commissioner, Admiral Thisara Samarasinghe, said the Sri Lankan Government would soon issue a road map for implementing the recommendations of the LLRC report.

On 21 March 2012, the Australian Senate adopted the following motion (presented by Senator Lee Rhiannon (Greens), in association with Senator Bob Carr (ALP) and Senator Gary Humphries (Lib):

- 1) The Senate notes:
 - a. On the 13th of February 2012, the then Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd issued a media release in response to the Sri Lankan Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) final report that stated:
 - i. The LLRC report contains constructive proposals for advancing reconciliation and reconstruction, including through reducing the presence of security forces in the North, care of internally displaced persons and media freedoms;
 - ii. The Australian Government has consistently urged Sri Lanka to investigate all allegations of crimes committed by both sides to the conflict, including those raised in the UN Secretary-General's Panel of Experts report;
 - iii. In light of the report's failure to comprehensively address such allegations, the government continues to call on Sri Lanka for all such allegations to be investigated in a transparent and independent manner.
 - b. calls on the Australian government, as a minimum, to support efforts to secure a US initiated resolution on Sri Lanka at the 19th Session of the UN Human Rights Council, through the Australian permanent representative in Geneva.

External Affairs Minister G.L. Peiris from Sri Lanka visited Australia between 17 and 21 June 2013, along with a group of MPs and officials. At a meeting with Sri Lankans hosted by the SL High Commissioner in Canberra, the Minister said the main purpose of the visit was to promote the forthcoming CHOGM to be held in Colombo in November. He stressed the good working relationship between the Australian Government and Sri Lankan authorities. The Foreign Minister Senator Bob Carr met Minister Peiris during the visit, and continued the engagement process that Australia has adopted with Sri Lanka – seeking to build confidence and friendship whilst reminding officials of the concerns about human rights.

At the CHOGM meeting in November in Colombo, no formal mention was made of the concerns about Sri Lanka's human rights situation in the final communiqué, but the heads of India, Canada and Mauritius boycotted the meeting, and there was much media attention to protests during the meeting. The British Prime Minister David Cameron made a trip to the north as a gesture of concern. Australia did not make any active intervention about human rights in Sri Lanka during the meeting, but the Prime Minister Tony Abbott thanked Sri Lanka for its help in combatting people smuggling and gave the country two patrol boats to assist those efforts.

The Australian Government supported the UN Human Rights Council resolutions on Sri Lanka in 2012 and 2013, but not in 2014 after the change of Australian Government. Julie Bishop MP, Foreign Minister, made a statement on 28 March which made the following points:

- Australia is not a member of the Human Rights Council, so did not vote on the resolution.
- A separate international investigation will not be the best way forward without the co-operation of the Sri Lankan government.
- The resolution does not recognize the significant progress made by the Sri Lankan government to promote economic growth and infrastructure.
- Australia will increase its efforts to work constructively with the Sri Lankan Government, the Tamil National Alliance and other stakeholders to identify ways to promote economic, social and cultural reconciliation.

Quaker Action

During 2013 QPLC maintained its concern, and Harold Wilkinson and David Purnell arranged two private meetings to express ongoing commitment to peace in Sri Lanka. The first (in May) was with the High Commissioner for Sri Lanka Admiral Thisara Samarasinghe. The meeting initially covered the work Quakers had done to promote dialogue, the work of other groups working for

reconciliation (e.g. Forum in Sydney and Global Reconciliation in Melbourne). The High Commissioner made it clear he would attend meetings so long as there was no association with groups showing support for LTTE. He emphasized the progress being made by the Government of Sri Lanka in restoring the deficit caused by the 30-year war, the rehabilitation of people displaced, and the revival of the economy.

In relation to Australia, the High Commissioner welcomed the visits made to Sri Lanka in December 2012 by the (then) Foreign Minister Bob Carr and the (then) Shadow Foreign Minister Julie Bishop. He encouraged visits to Sri Lanka by anyone wanting to see the real situation, and supported any efforts to bring together people from the different groups of the diaspora to work for reconciliation.

The second meeting was in June with John Fisher of the Sri Lanka Desk in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). He explained that the official approach was 'engagement' with Sri Lanka on matters of concern. Senator Bob Carr, after his visit to Sri Lanka, held a community forum in Sydney in January 2013, attended by a range of representatives from the Tamil and Sinhalese groups. At this event he made clear his wish that the different groups work together to bring forward proposals for promoting peace and development in Sri Lanka.

John Fisher then said that the aid given to Sri Lanka was focused on basic development needs, especially in the conflict-affected areas of the north and east. He said Australia would use the CHOGM meeting (November) to press the Sri Lankan government to implement the UNHRC resolutions and the recommendations of its own Lessons Learned commission. It was made clear that the Government supported any initiatives to encourage dialogue, and was open to suggestions from Quakers or others about ways to strengthen the communication and harmony across the diaspora.

As indicated at the beginning of this Brief, a further dialogue meeting was held in March 2014, and ongoing meetings are planned.

QPLC would value any feedback from Friends about activities relating to Sri Lanka, or concerns you wish us to take up.

Canberra
May 2014