

IN FOCUS

Human Rights in Sri Lanka Need to Be on Our Radar

*Contributed by Stephen Viederman, Former President of the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation
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The escalating human rights crisis in Sri Lanka is little reported in mainstream media. I gained my education about it last year from a friend and colleague in London. This friend opened my eyes to a situation that, in some respects, echoes better known situations like that in Sudan. But unlike the attention of the international human rights community on Sudan, the situation in Sri Lanka -- especially the condition of the minority Tamil population -- remains largely invisible. In the aftermath of an extensive and violent civil war, human rights funders should explore the human rights landscape in Sri Lanka and employ effective funding strategies to address this crisis.

The civil war in Sri Lanka began in the 1970s, when the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) initiated their separatist movement. Calling for the establishment of a separate state, *Eelam*, they argued that Tamils had been seriously and persistently discriminated against by successive majority Sinhalese governments. In May 2009, following a 26-year civil war with the Tamil Tigers, the final stages of which included indiscriminate bombardment of civilians and the execution of surrendered LTTE combatants, the government declared victory. As reported in the *New York Times* in April 2009, U.S. Secretary of State Clinton condemned the government's tactics in 2009. "I think that the Sri Lankan government knows," said Secretary Clinton, "that the entire world is very disappointed that, in its efforts to end what it sees as 25 years of conflict, it is causing such untold suffering."

In the aftermath of the civil war, close to 300,000 civilians were forced into internment camps. In these camps, families were separated; health conditions were grossly substandard (made worse by monsoon flooding); and individuals suspected of involvement with the LTTE were removed and taken to still-unknown fates. Approximately 100,000 people remain in displacement camps, while more than 10,000 people accused of being part of or associated with the Tigers are being held incommunicado in special detention centers. Treatment of the detainees is a source of concern, in light of Sri Lanka's well documented human rights record, including disappearances, torture and extrajudicial executions. More generally, the people continue to bear the brunt of both the Sri Lankan government's unrestrained warfare and the Tamil Tigers' own exploitation of civilians as shields and child soldiers. At the same time, repression of journalists has deepened, signalling continuation of human rights abuses that have marred Sri Lanka for extended periods over the last quarter century. *Time* magazine reported in its January, 2010 issue that "a year after the murder of the prominent Sri Lankan editor Lasantha Wickrematunge, the island's independent media is still under siege. At least half a dozen other journalists...have left the country in fear. [J]ournalists were not permitted to travel to or report in the former conflict zone....[T]hey still need permission ...to visit and write on the accelerated development and resettlement process now under way."

The human rights situation in Sri Lanka sets a worrying precedent at an international level. Countries such as Burma/Myanmar are drawing lessons from the Sri Lankan government and the tactics used to conduct the final phases of the war. China has shared its knowledge, 2

technology and methods of electronic monitoring and other surveillance with the Sri Lankan government.

Currently, efforts to support human rights work in Sri Lanka by international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and funders are sparse. While there are some international NGOs, UN agencies, and foreign governments supporting development work in Sri Lanka, the efficacy of this work is negatively impacted by endemic corruption at the government level and disregard for human rights. Funds for development work, even when they do reach those who need it, only fix part of Sri Lanka's problems. It is plausible that unequal and unjust development might be the fuel for a new phase in the conflict through a combination of two factors: the government's complacent belief that economic projects will be sufficient to rid Tamils of their political aspirations; and the possibility that these projects may yield profits for commercial actors and well-connected individuals at the expense of local communities. As evidence and case studies regarding conflict and development policy have shown, in order to make development work sustainable, it is critical to safeguard and include human rights within the development framework. As such, there are a few trusted, grassroots, human rights, pro-democracy organizations and some foreign agencies that are making sustainable efforts toward improving the human rights situation in Sri Lanka.

One such organization is the advocacy-oriented Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace and Justice (SLCPJ). SLCPJ seeks to put pressure on the Sri Lankan government to improve the conditions within refugee internment camps, limit media censorship, urge prosecution of perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity from all sides of the conflict, and put an end to human rights abuses more generally. The Campaign acts by informing and persuading those who can influence the Sri Lankan government, major donors, UN agencies, international NGOs, and tourism and apparel companies. SLCPJ has no ethnic or political affiliations and is run by a team of volunteers from a broad range of ethnic and religious backgrounds. The committee of advisors overseeing the Campaign include international figures as Noam Chomsky, Bianca Jagger, Bruce Haigh (Australia's former Deputy High Commissioner to Sri Lanka), Lakhdar Brahimi (the former Foreign Minister of Algeria who negotiated the end to the civil war in Lebanon), and Basil Fernando (Executive Director of the Hong Kong-based Asian Human Rights Commission). It is chaired by Edward Mortimer, the Director of Communications to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan from 2001 to 2006.

Also working in Sri Lanka since 2003 is a civilian peace-keeping force called the Nonviolent Peaceforce. The mandate of this organization is to support the peace process in Sri Lanka at a grassroots level and provide unarmed protection to people coming out of 25 years of war. The activities of the Nonviolent Peaceforce have ranged from entering active conflict zones to remove civilians in the crossfire, to providing opposing factions a safe space to negotiate. Other activities include serving as a communication link between warring factions; securing safe temporary housing for civilians displaced by war; providing violence prevention measures during elections; and negotiating the return of kidnapped family members.

Funders can explore these two organizations as resources to learn more about the peace process and to help Sri Lanka restore human rights in the aftermath of the civil war.

Resources for funders:

- 1) Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace and Justice website: <http://www.srilankacampaign.org/home.htm>
- 2) Nonviolent Peaceforce website: <http://www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org>
- 3) Human Rights Watch [report](#), "[War on the Displaced: Sri Lankan Army and LTTE Abuses against Civilians in the Vanni](#)"
- 4) United States Department of State "[Report](#) to Congress on Incidents During the Recent Conflict in Sri Lanka"
- 5) International Crisis Group [report](#), "Sri Lanka's Human Rights Crisis"