

PRESS RELEASE POST PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION SITUATION IN SRI LANKA

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A female suicide bomber blew herself up near the Sri Lankan Prime Minister's office in Colombo on January 5, killing 13 and injuring 22. Hours later, unidentified gunmen shot dead the leader of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress, Kumar Ponnambalam in a Colombo suburb. A group calling itself the "National Front Against Tigers" later claimed responsibility for the assassination. Not long after this, the Sri Lankan government imposed a snap curfew in Colombo and launched a massive search for LTTE suspects, rounding up nearly 3,000 Tamils for questioning.

The recent incidents in Colombo are only the latest phase in the recent escalation of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. In early November, the LTTE overran large tracts of previously government held territory in northern Sri Lanka and just before the Sri Lankan presidential elections, launched an attempt on the President's life. The government responded by vowing to eradicate terrorism "once and for all" while at the same time calling upon Tamil people to persuade the LTTE to enter into negotiations with the government.

The recent events in Colombo should be viewed in the context of this apparent hardening of positions on both sides. There is no reason to believe that the suicide bombing was the work of any group other than the LTTE, just as it is quite clear that the Tigers had no reason to murder Ponnambalam, an outspoken critic of the Sri Lankan government's approach to the ethnic conflict and a staunch support of the cause of a separate state and the LTTE's leadership in the struggle for Tamil Eelam. More significantly, Ponnambalam was played a prominent role in defending the civil rights of the Tamil residents of Colombo who have often come under 'scrutiny' from Sri Lankan security forces in their search for LTTE suspects and sympathisers. The claims of the "National Front Against Tigers" may not have any substance, but Ponnambalam was clearly targeted by somebody who wished to send a strong signal to the LTTE in general and the Tamils in Colombo in particular.

Clearly, the ethnic war in Sri Lanka is entering a new and more sinister phase. The LTTE is showing all signs of intensifying its campaign of terror in the south while the anti-LTTE drive is poised to take an extremely alarming turn, targeting Tamil civilians and activists who are considered "soft" on the LTTE. Such a response to the LTTE's terror is likely to lead to extremely repressive measures that has the potential to suppress all basic human rights. Disturbingly, the government's 'tough talk' against the LTTE is beginning to sound very similar to the rhetoric of many Sinhala Nationalist fringe groups that call for an all out war against the LTTE and its sympathisers. These groups that threw their weight behind the President during the recent election campaign, call for such drastic

measures as putting a stop to "Tamil colonisation of Colombo", special identifications for Tamils and severe punishments for family members of those accused of being LTTE cadres or sympathisers. That bring to mind the notorious Nazi measures against the Jews that preceded the Holocaust. If the present escalation of the conflict is allowed to proceed unchecked, there is the very real possibility that such sentiments will become mainstream opinion and even official policy rather than the ravings of the lunatic racist fringe.

Sri Lanka cannot afford this!

We have already been through a period of unimaginable horror when the Sri Lankan government launched a crackdown on the leftist JVP in 1987-90. The government responded to the JVP's terrorism by a counter-terror which took the form of the brutal suppression of all basic human rights. All opposition to the this brutal 'anti-terroristic' crusade that was used to crush the democratic rights of the masses was branded as "anti-government" and as such, an offence often punishable by death. The counter-terror took the lives of tens of thousands of Sri Lankans and left a generation scarred for life.

If the recent developments in Colombo are any guide, we may well be seeing the beginning of another reign of terror in the name of fighting the LTTE. The "unidentified gunmen" who stalked JVP sympathisers in 1987-90 may now reappear and takeover the streets again, this time hunting all political opponents of the war and the increasingly authoritarian rule of the government under the guise of eliminating "LTTE sympathisers". Speaking against the "war on terrorism" will become a terrorist activity itself and as such, punished with the utmost severity. The press will be muffled, the jails will be packed and the air will be choked with the stench of burning flesh. The death squads of the Preamadasa era will once again unleash their own brand of 'Sinhala' terror.

We do not want this. Not because we have any sympathy for the LTTE's senseless terror but because we are convinced that the answer to the LTTE's terror must be to address the issues that spawned that terror. This cannot be achieved by permitting the voices of unreason from the lunatic fringe to set the tone of political life in the South. The sinister forces of darkness and terror are moving from the sidelines to the centre of political life again. This must be stopped.

Here we reiterate in the strongest terms that the LTTE should immediately stop the indiscriminate violence against non-military targets. Such acts run counter to the interests of the Tamil people whom it seeks to defend and liberate. They play into the hands of the racist terrorists among the Sinhalese, and provide excuses for those forces to justify acts of terror and violence against Tamil civilians and all democratic anti-war forces in the South.

We call upon to both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to take all necessary measures to ensure that the interests of the people they are pledged to protect rather than bloodlust dictate their policies. We call upon all peace-loving people in the world to take all possible steps to prevent the violence in Sri Lanka from spiralling into mayhem and carnage.