

STATEMENT BY CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMANITARIAN CONCERNS

We are deeply saddened by and condemn the assassination of TNA MP Nadarajah Raviraj on November 10 2006. Mr. Raviraj was well known and widely respected by all communities for his commitment to rights and justice, and dedicated a great deal of his time and energy to create spaces for debate and discussion on the ethnic issue and on the peace process in Sri Lanka.

His death comes on the heels of an incident in which over fifty men, women and children, all of them internally displaced persons, living in Kathiraveli in Vakarai, Batticaloa, lost their lives due to shelling by the Sri Lankan security forces, and due to delays of access to medical services, on November 8, 2006.

These two incidents in a way epitomize the crisis our country is facing at present. As civil society organizations committed to the achievement of a sustainable peace through negotiations in Sri Lanka, we are gravely concerned about the present political impasse, and the deteriorating human rights and humanitarian situation in the country.

Since January 2006, we watched with horror and dismay as the figures of civilian death have reached unprecedented levels and as flagrant violations of the Ceasefire Agreement as well as of internationally accepted humanitarian and human rights norms and standards have taken place with impunity. The use of civilian as human shields, attacks on places of worship and refuge, retaliatory killings, abductions and disappearances, targeted assassinations and widespread displacement and forced resettlement have all led to a situation in which national and international actors have called for international human rights monitoring in Sri Lanka. The figures are staggering for a period of ten months: Since April 2006 over 2300 persons killed including 1038 persons for the months of September and October alone; over 200,000 displaced, over 15,000 Sri Lankan refugees in southern India and over 41 abductions reported to the Human Rights Commission in Jaffna in the month of September alone.

While cognizant of the appointment of two Presidential Commissions of Inquiry to look into various aspects of human rights violations of the past, we reiterate our firm conviction that on-going monitoring of the present situation by unbiased persons is imperative if the cycle of violence and impunity is to be brought to a halt.

Our appeal for a cessation of hostilities and for a resumption of negotiations on key issues relating to the human rights and humanitarian situation comes in the context of increased levels of violence and human rights abuse, including abductions, disappearances, killings and the continued restrictions on humanitarian access to areas of the north and east affected by the recent intensification of the conflict.

Our appeal is founded on our concerns for the rights of civilians living in the conflict-affected areas as well as of civilians of all minority communities living throughout the island.

We had hoped that at the recently concluded talks in Geneva, the delegations of the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE would arrive at a consensus regarding the ending of hostilities and embarking on a path of negotiations that would address the human rights and humanitarian concerns that have emerged as a consequence of the ongoing hostilities. We are extremely disappointed at the results, which show that neither party has fully acknowledged the gravity of the situation on the ground.

We strongly feel that civilian protection merits priority in terms of all future negotiations.

The opening of humanitarian corridors to enable relief to reach the tens of thousands of Sri Lankans, who have been stranded because of the various restrictions on access placed by both parties to the conflict, must be the first objective in such an undertaking. Focusing on this issue as a humanitarian one rather than as a matter of political or military strategy is essential if the civilian population of the north and east is to be reassured that their safety and well-being is of paramount concern to all. As the onset of the north-east monsoon renders the sea routes to Jaffna inoperable for the next few months, the opening up of access on land will be a matter of life and death to those Sri Lankans living in the north and east.

The lifting of restrictions of travel and transport of essential items to the north and east by both parties to the conflict is another area calling for urgent attention. Not only does this constitute a flagrant violation of the freedom of movement, it also hampers the delivery of essential goods and services to communities that need them the most.

In the light of Mr. Raviraj's request to have his remains cremated in Jaffna, the opportunity is created for the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to display magnanimity and statesmanship in re-opening the road to enable his funeral to take place with the dignity he well deserves.

Against a background in which since early this year, 2006, civilians have paid the heaviest price for the conflict, in terms of destruction of lives and livelihoods, and in terms of deprivation of their basic needs and rights, **we urge the parties to the conflict as well as other groups engaged in acts of violence and human rights abuse to take all steps possible to cease such actions** and to issue a public declaration that one has done so. In particular, we call upon them to:

- Declare a cessation of hostilities immediately;
- Guarantee access to all conflict-affected areas through the opening of humanitarian corridors;
- Accept international monitoring of the human rights and humanitarian situation

Signatories

Association of War Affected Women
Caring Hands
Centre for Human Rights and Development
Centre for Policy Alternatives
Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies
Human Care Foundation
International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo
International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism
INFORM
Kantha Shakthi Organization
Law and Society Trust
Muslim Women's Research and Action Forum
National Peace Council
Sri Lanka Women's NGO Forum
Women and Media Collective
Women's Education and Research Centre
Viluthu

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