

AN APPEAL FROM CONCERNED SOUTH ASIAN CITIZENS TO HALT THE
MASS MURDER OF TAMILIANS IN VANNI AREA OF SRI LANKA

10th April, 2009

To

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**Sub: PREVENT THE VANNI FROM BECOMING THE GRAVEYARD OF 180,000
TAMILS!**

We, Citizens of South Asia, are writing to express our serious concern about reports of mass deaths of Sri Lankan Tamils trapped in a small geographical area of the Vanni region in northern Sri Lanka in the weekend of 5th April, 2009. News reports in both the electronic as also print media, (7th April, 2009) have reported the death of over 700 Tamils in the last 3-4 days alone, with only a section of them being identified as LTTE cadres, meaning thereby that a large number of those killed are civilians trapped in the area.

For several weeks, we have expressed our concern to a variety of national and international authorities about the imminent massacre in case the Sri Lankan Government launches an all-out assault. In fact we pointed out that the possibilities of almost close to 150-180,000 Tamilians dying in the onslaught was not just conjecture but most probable. We also pointed out that the Sri Lankan Government had been dangling the fruits of its declared 'war on terror' as the '*final victory*' - meaning thereby the annihilation of the LTTE and its top leadership - and that the Government was pushing for the final solution before the soon-to-ensue Sinhala New year day falling on 14th April, 2009. And if several thousand Tamilians were to die, it was the price which had to be paid.

Our worst fears are turning true. The sheer scale of artillery and explosive attacks and the massive deaths of Tamils points out to the grave situation of the Vanni region becoming the graveyard for the annihilation of thousands of Tamil civilians.

Most unfortunately the rest of the world remains silent, unconcerned and uninvolved. Those countries who do raise concerns are immediately dubbed as 'LTTE supporters' by the Sri Lankan Government which does not brook any comment, howsoever mild it may be. Any mention of a ceasefire is considered by Sri Lankan officials as an unfriendly act and dubbed as interference in their sovereignty. The Sri Lankan Government also never tires of repeating that their fight is a principled fight against terror and that if at all there is any blame, it rests only with the LTTE. It is their consistent claim that all allegations of human rights abuse by the state and its agents are nothing but propaganda of the LTTE and that all those who repeat it have been influenced by the LTTE.

So vicious is the attack by the Sri Lankan state on anyone daring to even remotely raise issues of human rights concerns, that none have been spared the vicious and vituperative barrage of verbal assault and name calling. From Louise Arbor, the former UN High Commissioner for Human rights, the highest UN official in charge of human rights in the world body, to UN Special Rapporteur on Extra Judicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Philip Alston, everyone has been treated as terrorists themselves, without even the modicum of respectability of being 'terrorist supporters'. The brazen and insulting manner by which Sri Lankan authorities have attacked any person or agency seeking accountability of the Sri Lankan Government to human rights standards can be gauged by the fact that several British Parliamentarians were forced to take up the issue of being branded terrorists by the Sri Lankan officials in a debate in the UK House of Commons!

The reality is that the Sri Lankan Government has utilised the 'war on terror' as a cover to systematically destroy all democratic processes and institutions in Sri Lanka. While retaining the facade of democracy, the government has turned the state into a terror apparatus, crushing not just the Tamils, but also others challenging its actions. As a result, numerous non-Tamil, Sinhalese citizens have also fallen prey to the Sri Lankan terror state. Journalists have been the major targets with 19 journalists, both Tamil and Sinhala being killed in the last 2 years, over 35 exiled, driven away from the country or silenced, and numerous publications closed down. The assassination of Lasantha Wickramathunge, Editor of Sunday Leader, a widely respected Sri Lankan weekly in January highlights the fate of anyone challenging the ruling dispensation.

Unfortunately the Sri Lankan Government cannot hide its record of terror as respected and expert UN bodies have investigated and brought out reports about different aspects of the breakdown of democratic and judicial systems. The May, 2008 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Philip Alston, and the February, 2008 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and other Inhuman, Cruel or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Manfred Nowak highlight the systematic way by which rule of law has been replaced with 'rule of impunity' in Sri Lanka.

Recently, on 9th February, 2009, 10 top UN Experts issued a statement sharing the deep concern of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights over the rapidly deteriorating conditions facing civilians in the Vanni region and the significant number of civilian casualties. They also deplored the restrictions on humanitarian access to conflict areas which heightens the ongoing

serious violations of the most basic economic and social rights. Importantly they pointed out:

"Notwithstanding the severity of the abuses in areas of conflict, the Experts wish to highlight that the problem is deeper and more endemic. The conflict deflects attention from the impunity which has been allowed to go unabated throughout Sri Lanka. The fear of reprisals against victims and witnesses, together with a lack of effective investigations and prosecutions, has led to a circle of impunity that must be broken. The Experts continue to receive disturbing reports of torture, extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances throughout the country¹".

This is the character of the Sri Lankan state which is carrying on an attack of genocidal proportions confident that no power on earth can restrain or contain it. It is important therefore that as world citizens, we raise our voices of concern and demand that the UN and other governments, including the Government of India, respond more directly and forcefully, to call for a cessation of hostilities and an end to the war.

We are extremely concerned over reports that the Sri Lankan government is using banned and illegal explosives, including bombs with possible chemical and nerve gases. More specifically there are serious apprehensions that **thermobaric bomb** - a bomb that uses a fuel-air explosive capable of creating overpressures equal to an atomic bomb – has been used in this mass killing.

Survivors of the cleansing that took place over the weekend have gone on record saying that the bombings over the weekend by the Sri Lankan army were different in that the bombs and explosives caused widespread and serious internal injuries indicating the probable use of such explosives which would rain mass deaths in a wide region around the place where the bombs explode. These stories have sparked widespread concern, anger and frustration amongst families of diaspora Tamils as also amongst concerned world citizens in Tamil Nadu and other parts of the world.

The charge that the Sri Lankan government used banned and illegal chemical explosives cannot be rubbished or pooh-poohed as conjectures, given the long track record of Sri Lanka security forces using the banned cluster bombs and engaging in aerial targeted bombings of civilian areas which are banned under the Geneva Conventions. Across the world there is a tremendous outpouring of anguish and agony amongst the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora at the prospects that surviving Tamil civilians will be mass annihilated through the use of weapons of mass killing. It is therefore very critical that the UN urgently intervene and seriously restrain the Sri Lankan Government from using banned and illegal explosives and weaponry, including explosives using chemical, nerve and biologically destructive materials. It should be noted that the Sri Lankan Government has never denied the use of cluster bombs.

It is very important that the truth about the actual use of these ‘weapons of mass destruction’ including **thermobaric** bombs be independently verified and its source of supply identified. If indeed these horrific weapons have been used, the international community should immediately initiate prosecution of the highest functionaries of the Sri Lankan state and the Government of the country that supplied these bombs for commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

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[http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/\(httpNewsByYear_en\)/336663129F8B047CC1257558005525C6?OpenDocument](http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/(httpNewsByYear_en)/336663129F8B047CC1257558005525C6?OpenDocument) @ 18 Feb 2009

The unimaginable anguish of the global diaspora of families of the 150,000 Tamils caught in the Vanni needs to be settled with independent verification of the nature of weapons and explosives used in the recent mass killings. That is the least that those who perished in the brutal assault of last week deserve. And if indeed, banned or illegal chemical or other agents have been used, the international community should initiate necessary humanitarian interventions including prosecution of the highest functionaries of the Sri Lankan Government for commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

We, as world citizens, would also like to point out that the humanitarian crisis has been made worse because the Sri Lankan Government has banned independent observers of UN agencies, the ICRC and other independent institutions from operating in the war zone. IT IS IN THE ABSENCE OF INDEPENDENT REPORTING FROM THE AREA THAT PEOPLE HAVE TO DEPEND ON INFORMATION FROM UNVERIFIED SOURCES. It is of utmost importance that independent observers are sent both to monitor the war as also to ensure humanitarian aid reaches the area.

The innocent Tamil civilians have been living a precarious life without food, water and health supplies for the last 8-10 weeks. Emaciated, starved, severely malnourished and seriously injured, the women, children, aged persons and remaining men are already dying. They deserve the protection that can be offered by concerned world citizens who by demanding an end to the war will also be asserting a chance for these innocent men, women and children to live.

It is important that saner voices around the world get together and call the bluff of the Sri Lankan Government. Despite its arrogant stance of not being bothered, the Sri Lankan Government cannot afford to antagonise world community, especially when it is seeking to obtain funds from the IMF and the World Bank for a tranche of \$ 1.9 billion, partly to offset the economic costs of the war. As world citizens we need to ask all the National Governments to oppose all forms of financial aid to Sri Lanka until it ceases the war against its own citizens and ensures humanitarian aid and relief to be reached to the suffering thousands caught up in the Vanni region.

As citizens of the world, we therefore demand that the UN and the International Community immediately intervene to ensure immediate cessation of the brutal and savage war in the Vanni region of Sri Lanka and ensure immediate humanitarian relief to the suffering thousands caught in the middle of the war. In any case, even by the Sri Lankan government's account, almost the entire top hierarchy of the LTTE has been eliminated and all the land is now under their control. There can be no justification in carrying on the war any longer.

As citizens of the world, we would also demand that there be an independent monitoring of the Camps where civilians are being lodged and that independent observers, including from the free media both Sri Lankan and outside be permitted to visit the region and collect accounts from people.

Of still greater importance is that urgent medical supplies be reached to the area with permission for doctors and medical personnel so that they can provide urgent humanitarian medical assistance. These measures can brook no delay. The difference would be between dying in war or dying in a war zone – neither is going to help people to survive.

We also ask of the Indian Government to use its moral influence to persuade Sri Lanka to give up its belligerent and abusive attacks on anyone raising humanitarian concerns regarding the crisis in

the Vanni region and to seriously consider cessation of hostilities. Despite the realities of an election process, the Indian Government has a higher moral duty to ensure the safety and survival of thousands of innocent Tamils caught in the middle of a war over which they have no control. India, as the land of Gandhi, cannot shirk its ethical and moral duty to ensure immediate end of the war and safety and security of Tamils.

As citizens of South Asia, we therefore demand that the UN and the International Community, effectively intervene to ensure immediate cessation of the brutal and savage war in Sri Lanka and ensure immediate humanitarian relief to the suffering thousands caught in the middle of the war. We also call upon the Governments in the South Asian region, viz., the Government of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives to intervene forcefully to stop the genocidal war that threatens peace not just in Sri Lanka, but in all of South Asia.

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