

Good morning everyone, and thank you for coming. We are a group called Canadian Academics for Tamil Rights who put together a statement to the Prime Minister which attracted over 125 signatures from across Canada last week. While initially directed mainly at Canadian academics across the country, we also received signatures from several prominent Canadians from other walks of life.

Our aim in issuing this statement was to call on the Canadian Government to take a stand on the situation in Sri Lanka. As you are well aware, Tamil civilians in the so-called “safe zone” are facing a brutal assault. There are still some 100,000 civilians under siege in the tiny coastal strip. Confirmed reports indicate that more than 6,500 civilians, including 700 children, have been killed since January 2009.

The conditions for those who have escaped this war zone are no better. Displaced persons who have managed to flee the fighting have been placed in *de facto* detention camps by the Sri Lankan government where they are denied freedom of movement, in contravention of international standards.

The overall human rights situation in Sri Lanka has deteriorated dramatically since the current government assumed power in 2006. The Sri Lankan government has utilized the “war on Terror” as a cover to systematically destroy all democratic processes and institutions. Sri Lanka was ranked 165th out of 173 countries in the ‘Reporters Without Borders’ 2008 press freedom index, the lowest ranking of any democratic country.

It is especially worrying that, in an effort to shield its own actions from public scrutiny, the Sri Lankan government has barred most humanitarian agencies, independent observers and journalists from the conflict zones. As a result there is a lack of timely information about the situation of the trapped civilians as well as severe shortfalls in humanitarian assistance.

We believe that the government of Canada has a special responsibility to act to bring about an end to violations of international law and to make a significant contribution to a political resolution of this conflict.

As host to the largest Tamil diaspora outside of Sri Lanka, Canada should assume a proactive role in promoting and supporting efforts aimed at resolving the legitimate grievances of the Tamil people including recognition of their right to self-determination. The Tamil community plays an important role in the life of many of our cities; their concerns should be our concerns too.

The previous government supported an advisory role for the Canadian Forum of Federations in Sri Lanka while the current government appointed a representative to the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons (IIGEP) with a mandate to observe investigations into human rights abuses (the IIGEP withdrew from Sri Lanka in March 2008 in the face of Sri Lanka’s failure to meet even the basic minimum standards in probing rights abuses). Canada is uniquely positioned to reactivate and support such constructive forms of engagement.

We therefore call on the Government of Canada to:

- Work with both parties to the conflict to implement an immediate and comprehensive ceasefire.

- Urge the International community and the UN to take responsibility for the protection of Tamil civilians.
- Urge the UN Security Council to authorize timely and decisive measures to halt mass atrocities in the Vanni region of Sri Lanka, including the dispatch of a special envoy to the region, and the creation of a commission of inquiry into crimes under international law committed by any person or entity.
- Demand that the government of Sri Lanka remove restrictions imposed on access to the conflict zone for humanitarian workers and media and permit international observers in the detention camps.
- Demand that the LTTE allow civilians to continue to leave the conflict area.
- Initiate internationally mediated efforts aimed at achieving a durable political solution to the conflict in Sri Lanka.

We were encouraged to see that Minister Oda went to SL, and would like to see Canada's involvement continue. In particular, we wonder if the aid being promised will be made conditional on a ceasefire, which so far the SL government has refused to declare.

We have been moved and impressed with the level of sustained mobilization by the Tamil community in the past few months. Many of those most active in these mobilizations are our students, and we know from talking to them how almost every one of them has suffered a personal loss. We believe it is time to act, and to tell our government that our Tamil brothers and sisters are not alone in their concern for their families in Sri Lanka