



PEOPLE FOR EQUALITY AND RELIEF IN LANKA

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(Washington, D.C., May 18, 2020) — Today marks the eleventh anniversary of the Mullivaikkal Massacre, marked annually as Tamil Genocide Remembrance Day. PEARL joins Tamils around the world in remembering the Tamil victims and survivors of the massacre during the final phase of the war in Sri Lanka. PEARL also shares the pain and sorrow caused by the end of the decades-old armed resistance that sought self-determination for the Tamil people in a separate Tamil homeland. The collective trauma of Mullivaikkal has left an indelible mark on the psyche of Tamils across the world.

The final months of the war were marred by horrific acts of state-sponsored violence and allegations of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide perpetrated against the Tamil people by the Sri Lankan government. The Sri Lankan military intentionally and indiscriminately shelled civilians, government-designated safe zones, and hospitals; committed sexual violence against Tamil men and women; forcefully displaced 300,000 Tamils; and intentionally restricted food and medicine. State security forces perpetrated torture, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, and extrajudicial killings, which continue to this day. Approximately 70,000-140,000 Tamils were killed and at least another 25,000-30,000 were maimed. Eleven years after the war, no government has taken even the most basic, credible and confidence-building steps towards accountability.

Tamil resistance survives while violence and impunity remain the norm on the island. The election of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who served as the Defense Secretary during May 2009, as President is the clearest example of the complete impunity enjoyed by the Sri Lankan government. Rajapaksa has further securitized and militarized Sri Lanka by appointing credibly accused war criminals known to have committed atrocities against the Tamil people to high-ranking political, military and diplomatic posts. Unsurprisingly, in March 2020, the Rajapaksa government withdrew altogether from the co-sponsored UN Human Rights Council Resolution 30/1 (2015) agreed to by the previous government. The international community's failure to protect the Tamil people during the height of the genocide and to hold the Sri Lankan government accountable to its international commitments enabled the Sri Lankan government to delay and ultimately deny transitional justice processes.

With the current COVID-19 pandemic further isolating countries, closing borders, and shifting government priorities, there is a well-founded fear that the Sri Lankan government will use the pandemic to further repress Tamils. Credibly accused war criminals such as Shavendra Silva and Kamal Gunaratne lead the COVID-19 relief efforts. The extreme levels of surveillance and military presence in Tamil areas has further increased. Tamil people bear the brunt of economic challenges caused by COVID-19 and relevant restrictions while suffering denial of their right to memorialize the dead and to seek justice. Today, Tamil civilians across the North-East have been harassed by Sri Lankan security forces and threatened to be sent to quarantine centres for continuing commemorations.

In spite of this, the Tamil liberation struggle lives on. The fight for Tamil self-determination has undergone various shifts since the island's independence, but our dedication and resolute bravery has always been a central tenet to our struggle. As PEARL continues to advocate for political and legal genocide recognition, accountability for mass atrocities, and self-determination for the Tamil people, we do so carrying the memory of the past in our work and relying on the resilience and strength of our people for the future. Today, we mourn the dead, attempt to understand our collective trauma and commit to fulfilling Tamil aspirations for sovereignty, freedom, and justice.