

Speaker: David Miliband

Location: House of Commons

“I want to very warmly welcome all of you to the House of Commons if you’ve come from around Britain, and welcome you to Britain, those of you who’ve come from around the world. I think that it is very significant indeed that the Global Tamil Forum should have brought people together from fourteen countries. That in itself is a huge achievement. It is a reflection of the breadth of the Tamil diaspora around the world and I hope it speaks to a unity that will serve the rights and hopes of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka.

It’s also important to recognise the history that’s associated with Britain’s relationship with Sri Lanka. Father Emmanuel spoke about this. And I hope that not just historians, but Tamils will come to look back on this meeting in this building as being a time and a moment of significance for the future of Sri Lanka.

I also want to recognise on the platform with me here are three Members of Parliament who have played an outstanding role in the British debate about the future of Sri Lanka. Virendra Sharma on my right, Keith Vaz, Siobhain McDonagh have all been stout defenders of the rights of all Sri Lankans and I think it is right not just to recognise the role of Governments, but to recognise the work of parliamentarians and also to recognise the work of community groups. Some of them made by Tamils, but others made by churches, made by other groups of British people who’ve seen the plight in Sri Lanka and wanted to respond to it and I think it’s important to recognise that this is a grass roots movement in Britain, not just a Government led movement.

I also want to say that the foundation of the Global Tamil Forum, the inauguration of its international work, is an important moment for politics and above all politics in Sri Lanka, because there is no substitute for political voice in asserting political rights. Tamils know to their cost the price of violence against them and in their name. We know that the civil war is over, but the civil peace has yet to be built and it is the dedication of this organisation to build a lasting equitable and endurable political civil peace that I think is the test of all of our effort.

I want to commend very, very strongly your decision to, not just to support non violence, but to advocate non violence. I think that history has shown time and again that lasting peace is not found through weapons and through warfare

but through politics, however hard it is to persevere with it. We've seen this in our own United Kingdom, notably in the state of Northern Ireland, but also in other parts of the world and the road ahead no doubt will be long and hard in some ways that I will describe in a moment. But I think the founding commitment not just to a fully inclusive political process, but to support non violence as the means to achieve it, is something that speaks to the deepest values of the Tamil people and actually, as I will say later, to the deepest values of people everywhere.

Perhaps I should say why I'm here. It's not just that London is the venue for this important meeting. It's that the importance of establishing a lasting peace in Sri Lanka matters. It matters because of the deep links that exist between Britain and Sri Lanka, the deep links that exist between British people and Sri Lankans of all kinds, and it's also that the future of Sri Lanka is important for the future of South Asia more generally. And I think that any Foreign Secretary would want to be here to listen, but also to support about the way ahead.

For twenty six years all the peoples of Sri Lanka suffered from the effects of civil war, but we know that while all communities were hit, the Tamil communities were the worst hit. We know that during the conflict Tamils were in every day fear for their lives, trapped between Government forces and the LTTE, many thousands killed we know, seventy thousand in total from all communities. Thousands more injured or maimed which often is not mentioned in a grim recitation of statistics.

We know that civilians were displaced, individuals, children separated from their families, homes and livelihoods destroyed and we know also that the Tamil diaspora around the world reflects conflict and it reflects fear around the world. We are proud in this country, very proud, of the contribution that British Tamils are making to our country. You are our neighbours, our friends, our relatives. We're proud of your role in business, in commerce, in politics. But you know very deeply that you would like to be making a contribution above all in Sri Lanka and it is that tension, that dual focus first of all on Britain and first of all, and secondly on Sri Lanka, that brings us together.

It's also important to say as Tamils lived in fear, some expelled from their country, that they, you also lived in the shadow of the LTTE, a terrorist organisation which committed countless atrocities itself, which refused to tolerate dissent, which forcibly recruited children as soldiers and which again refused to allow Tamil civilians to escape from the fighting. I think it's important to say those things as well.

And we know that today land mines are still scattered across the former conflict zone, the lack of infrastructure and the lack of electricity, the lack of irrigation, poverty rates in Tamil areas are at least double those in the other provinces. And after the spike in violence that preceded the end of the civil war, nearly a hundred thousand Tamils still remain in the IDP camps, unable to return to their homes. And I will never forget the faces that I saw in the IDP camps in Sri Lanka ten months ago. I will never forget the stories that I was told of innocent people separated from their families, of brutalisation and of profound fear about the future. And whenever I think of that statistic of a hundred thousand people still in IDP camps I think of individual men, women and in some cases young teenagers talking to me about all they wanted was to be treated as a decent human being, able to go about their lives in a decent way. And that's what motivates me and it's what motivates the Prime Minister and it's what motivates the Government to believe that the aspirations of the Tamil people expressed as the hope of a decent life alongside others in Sri Lanka is something that should motivate us in the future.

We try in the short term to alleviate the suffering. We try to send money and we do send money, tens of millions of pounds are sent from Britain by the Government. But I know many millions of pounds are sent by the Tamil communities too to try to make a difference through the humanitarian agencies who should be given far greater access and freedom of movement. We also continue to urge the Government of Sri Lanka to return the remaining IDPs to their home areas, to grant full access to NGOs and we do not forget either the eleven thousand five hundred or so ex combatants also still in camps.

Now despite the scale of this humanitarian crisis and the need for us to focus on it as a matter of urgency, we do not forget the longer term, because anyone who cares about the future of Sri Lanka knows that it will not be built by aid alone. It must be built through a new political settlement. Since the end of the civil war, since the re-election of President Rajapaksa, as we look forward and await the parliamentary elections, we continue to make the case that the President should use his mandate for a real drive for national reconciliation, a real drive to respect the rights of every single Sri Lankan, a real drive to fulfil the commitments, constitutional and other reforms, that would make a difference.

Now to do this there needs to be greater effort to respect the rights of all Sri Lankans. It is because of our concern about the implementation of core commitments in respect of human rights conventions that we along with twenty six other members of the European Union supported the European Commission's recommendation to suspend Sri Lanka from the benefits of the

GSP+ trade programme. We did, we did so because trade and values need to be linked. We did so because the rules of the GSP programme put values at their heart. Those values are values of civil and political rights, because we are concerned about violence and allegations of malpractice in the election campaign and of course there are also important commitments made by the Government in respect of media freedom. There is also the issue of the arrest of the presidential candidate who like anyone else arrested should be treated in accordance with Sri Lankan law.

We also believe that as well as the GSP issue there is an issue of history because history is there to be learned from. We can not live in our history, but we have to learn from it and I think that my reading of reconciliation around the world is that if history is buried then reconciliation never happens. We have recently celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the release of Nelson Mandela and the commitment to expose history to the full glare of publicity, the commitment to reconcile history as well as reconcile people has been an important part of the South African experience and I think is an important lesson from the South African experience. That is why we continue to call as a Government for a process to investigate serious allegations of violation of international humanitarian law by both sides in the conflict. If credible and independent, such efforts could make an important contribution to reconciliation between Sri Lanka's communities.

I've also said repeatedly that the concern with civil and political rights today, concern with the history, concern with the IDPs, feeds in to a constitutional point that there needs to be a genuinely inclusive political process in Sri Lanka which involves all communities of Sri Lanka. It's important to say that whenever a British Minister says this, there are accusations that we are trying to tell Sri Lanka how to govern or run its own affairs. I want to refute that very, very clearly, because the shape of any future political settlement is for the Sri Lankan people, all the Sri Lankan people recognising all their rights, including minority rights, it's for them to determine. But we will continue to be an advocate for the universal human rights that we believe underpin the basis not just of democracy, but of decent societies everywhere.

I just want to conclude on the following point. Politics is about Governments, it's also about people, it's about people in countries that are trying to chart a peaceful future, but it's also about those with links around the world and that relates to the significance of today's event. This democratic group, this heartily engaged forum is well placed to influence debate, well placed because of its commitments and well placed because of its contacts.

And it is my view that political reconciliation will require the active engagement of Tamil communities around the world. It will require you to speak up for your values of non violence. It will require you to speak up for a vision of a decent Sri Lanka that respects all its people and it will require you to speak up for a spirit that recognises that if people can not find a way to live together they will drift apart.

These commitments are easy to say, especially easy to say from the relative comfort of a democratic country like the United Kingdom. But it's important that we say that we are in solidarity with all those Sri Lankans, whatever their background, who want to live up to the commitments in the Sri Lankan constitution and who want to live up to the founding ideals of a country that respects every single one of its citizens without fear or favour. The struggle for equality and democracy is one that should unite all Sri Lankans and all Governments around the world. On behalf of the UK Government I can assure you it does. Thank you very much indeed".

-ends-