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## **Cross Party MPs Support for Tamils at the UK Parliament**

Without exception all Members of Parliament from all three main political parties in a show of solidarity and concern spoke in support of Tamils and the general suffering of the Tamils, particularly in Vanni, North of Sri Lanka. They also showed no remorse in condemning the Government of Sri Lanka for its military action against the Tamil Nation to fundamentally a political problem and its persistent human rights violations. The UK Government Junior Minister responsible for the Department for International Development (DFID) Rt. Hon Michael Foster MP announced that an additional aid of £2.5 million to support the efforts of the ICRC and other UN agencies and NGOs. **This confirms the statement made by his predecessor Rt. Hon Shahid Malik MP to the British Tamils Forum at a meeting held at the end of September that the UK Government will be sending aid via international aid agencies and local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and NOT through the Government of Sri Lanka.**

A greater number of Members of Parliament from the main three political parties unlike other adjournment debates attended this debate at the Westminster Hall led by Rt. Hon Joan Ryan MP.

Hon John Cummings MP Chaired the debate, which started almost precisely at 1 pm. There was a large presence of the Tamil community which meant a further room beyond the public gallery had to be arranged for people who couldn't be accommodated within the hall. ["I apologise for not being here at the start of the debate. I had to find another room for those who cannot get into the Public Gallery, which shows the strength of feeling of the mainly Tamil community represented in all our constituencies"](#) – Rt. Hon **Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden – Labour)

Representative of the High Commissioner of Government of Sri Lanka had to settle for this additional room as well.

In a commendable speech delivered eloquently with emotions, conviction and understanding of the current situation in the Vanni area Rt. Hon Joan Ryan MP captured the hearts and minds of the Tamil community not just in the UK and Vanni but all over the world.

["We are here today to urge the British Government to say and do more. That is undoubtedly the truth, but I also think that the British Government have raised their voice on these matters and it is incumbent on all parties in the House to do that together. It is clear that we are on the brink of catastrophe. That is why the timing of the debate is very important. If the international aid agencies cannot do so, who will ensure that the Tamils have somewhere to sleep, something to eat, access to health services and some security? I fear that it will not be the Government of Sri Lanka"](#) – Rt. Hon **Joan Ryan** (Enfield, North – Labour)

An ardent supporter of the Tamil cause, Hon Lee Scott (Conservative) highlighted the plight of children some 40,000 of them caught up in the conflict.

["Does the right hon. Lady agree that included in the 250,000 innocent Tamil civilians are 40,000 children who are suffering now, and that the time has come for NGOs to be allowed back in to deal with humanitarian problems?"](#) - Hon Lee Scott (Ilford, North - Conservative)

Another genuine supporter of the Tamil struggle and Foreign Affairs spokesperson for the Liberal Democratic Party Hon Ed Davey MP stressed the need for the UK Government to take much stronger line against the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) for refusing to allow international human rights monitoring.

# British Tamils Forum



"Although we are seeing a catastrophe unfold and we need urgent action both from the British Government and the international community in putting pressure on the Sri Lankan Government, this is a story that many of us have watched unfolding for several years now, with the Sri Lankan Government's unwillingness to allow human rights groups to monitor the undermining of human rights in the Tamil communities and Tamil area of the island. Does the right hon. Lady agree that it is time that the British Government takes a much stronger line against the Colombo Government on their failure to allow even human rights monitoring of the conflict in the north and east of the island?" – Hon **Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton – Lib Dem)

Almost as an echo of a question raised at the South East Asian Delegation Committee meeting at the European Parliament on 7 October 2008 by the British Tamils Forum representative Hon Barry Gardiner MP asked the UK Government to condemn the alleged recent statement made by the Head of Army Lt. General Sarath Fonseka. BTF member asked from the Members of the European Parliament and other dignitaries including the Sri Lankan

Ambassador to the European Union Mr. Ravinath Ariyasinghe at the EU Parliament what would be the consequence of a similar statement if made by the Head of British Army. He suggested that a similar statement would have seen the Head of Army of any other country be packing his belongings almost immediately, meaning that any other reasonable government would have sacked the person immediately.

"Will he take the opportunity to condemn the remarks of Lieutenant-General Fonseka, who was recently reported as saying that **he strongly believes that this country belongs to the Sinhalese?**" He said: "We being the majority in the country, 75 per cent., we will never give in and we have the right to protect this country. **Is not that exactly the sort of remark that feeds the problem, and does it not show the intransigence of the Sinhalese Government?**" – Hon **Barry Gardiner** (Brent, North – Labour)

In another remarkable display of unity amongst cross party MPs Hon **Adrew George** (St. Ives – Lib Dem) said "I went to Sri Lanka in early April and was privileged to visit the north of the country. When the President came to this country in June, I had the opportunity to ask him about the role of Sri Lankan and international NGOs and human rights monitors. His attitude worries me. He believes that the majority of Sri Lanka-based NGOs are in fact fronts for the Tamil Tigers, and that international NGOs and human rights monitors are involved in gun running for them. **If that is the attitude of the Sri Lankan Government, does the Minister agree that the international community needs to be a great deal more forthright to ensure proper monitoring and humanitarian relief?**"

Following are some of the quotes of the Minister Rt. Hon **Michael Foster** – (The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development) who responded to Rt. Hon Joan Ryan MP and other Members of Parliament who raised valid and timely questions.

"The UK monitors the situation in Sri Lanka constantly and has increased its humanitarian aid in the light of circumstances on the ground. We provided more than £532,000 for conflict related activities in 2006, an additional £1 million in 2007, and £250,000 in January this year. Only a few weeks ago, we sent a humanitarian expert to assess the situation and to see what further help is needed. On the basis of his findings in Vavuniya and Jaffna, **I am pleased to announce that DFID is providing an additional £2.5 million to support the efforts of the ICRC and other UN agencies and NGOs. Part of that funding will go to the north and part to the ICRC and UN High Commissioner for Refugees to support their work in other conflict-affected areas of Sri Lanka, including the Jaffna peninsular and the east of the country.**

To tackle the urgent risk of starvation, last month we lobbied for an emergency delivery of UN food aid. On 2 October, a UN humanitarian convoy of 51 trucks successfully delivered food rations to northern Sri Lanka. The food will provide emergency rations for an estimated 230,000 people. With the rainy season upon us, as has been said, the demand for humanitarian aid will grow markedly"

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“...in the south, there have been restrictions on the freedom of expression, with journalists and newspaper distribution agents intimidated and sometimes killed. Three democratically elected MPs have been killed in the past few years, and many ordinary people have been reported as disappeared or have simply been killed.

The EU notes with concern the trend in attacks and threats on journalists, civil society organisations and lawyers. As far back as 2006, Louise Arbour, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, was sufficiently concerned to call on the international community to monitor the unfolding human rights situation, suggesting that the events were not simply ceasefire violations, but grave breaches of international human rights and humanitarian law. That situation remains”

One of the many British Tamils who attended as a spectator said after the debate “We are also very grateful to all the other Members of Parliament who shared their genuine concerns and their constituents' grievances. However I was personally very disappointed that the Minister Rt. Hon Michael Foster missed an opportunity to condemn the Government of Sri Lanka for it's indiscriminate aerial bombardment which is causing this massive scale displacement and human catastrophe. This, even after the Rt. Hon Keith Vaz interrupted to share the latest news of the bombing of a bridge in a vital supply route which is also the ONLY route available to feed the hungry and displaced”

**The full Hansard Report of the debate can be found on the following link:**

[http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm081014/halltext/81014h0009.htm#column\\_240WH](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm081014/halltext/81014h0009.htm#column_240WH)

## Sri Lanka

12.59 pm

**Joan Ryan** (Enfield, North) (Lab): I am pleased to welcome my hon. Friend the Minister to his new responsibilities; I wish him well in his post.

There is increasing recognition of the urgency of the humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka, so I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the subject at this crucial time. Concern about the situation is shared by hon. Members on both sides of the House, as the attendance at today's debate shows. It is also deeply felt among the large number of Sri Lankans who have settled in the UK. In London alone, there are more than 150,000 Sri Lankan Tamils, who since their arrival here have made and continue to make a distinguished contribution to our public life. Their concern about recent developments was made perfectly clear last Monday, when 6,000 of them marched on Parliament.

Those worries are increasingly finding an international voice. I note the recent comments by the European Commissioner for External Relations and by the UN Secretary-General, which clearly acknowledged the seriousness of the present situation. I also welcome the recent statement issued by my right hon. Friend Lord Malloch-Brown and by my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mr. Malik), when he was an International Development Minister. That statement acknowledges the gravity of the situation. However, we need to say and do more.

The current humanitarian crisis must be understood in the context of two interrelated developments: first, the escalation of fighting, particularly since July, between Government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam; and secondly the compulsory withdrawal of UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations, including all their staff, supplies and vehicles, from the northern Vanni region. That measure was issued on 8 September and came into force on 29 September.

Although this debate is on the humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka, my remarks will focus on the Vanni region. That does not mean that suffering in Sri Lanka is confined to the Tamil-speaking areas. Like all hon. Members, I read with horror the news of two suicide bombings in Sri Lanka last week in which 30 innocent civilians lost their lives. I am sure that all hon. Members present will join me in condemning the slaughter of innocent civilians wherever and whenever that takes place. None the less, it is fair to say that the costs of war are concentrated in the Tamil-speaking areas of the north.

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**Barry Gardiner** (Brent, North) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will be aware that until December of last year, about 70 lorries a day of humanitarian aid were going into the north and north-east; in September of this year, that figure fell to zero. Does that not precisely represent the scale of the humanitarian crisis now faced by the displaced people in the north and east of Sri Lanka?

**Joan Ryan:** My hon. Friend makes a very valid point. I will make some comments relating to his remarks and I hope that the Minister will do the same.

The conflict in Sri Lanka has been as protracted as it is bloody. In a civil war that has spanned more than 25 years, as many as 200,000 lives have been lost. There is, however, reason to believe that the current spate of violence between Government forces and the LTTE in the north, particularly since July 2008, is worse than the conflict that preceded the 2002 ceasefire, and that the Government military campaign has become more brutal and indiscriminate. With that escalation in violence has come a deterioration in the humanitarian situation. I am talking about more than 4,000 people killed since 2006, tens of thousands injured and more than 220,000 displaced. I use the word “displaced” hesitatingly, because for me it does not really capture the seriousness of the situation. It seems to imply a minor and perhaps temporary inconvenience when it really means people being forced to leave their home and all their worldly possessions and abandon their livelihood and then finding themselves lacking adequate shelter, sanitation, clean drinking water and food to feed their children. For some 10,000 families, displacement means living in the open air, living under the trees.

**Mr. Lee Scott** (Ilford, North) (Con): Does the right hon. Lady agree that included in the 250,000 innocent Tamil civilians are 40,000 children who are suffering now, and that the time has come for NGOs to be allowed back in to deal with humanitarian problems?

**Joan Ryan:** The hon. Gentleman makes a strong point, and I agree with him.

At the same time as the humanitarian situation has worsened, the agencies and bodies that were previously giving people food, offering medical treatment and providing families with things such as mosquito nets, bed linen and sleeping mats have been forced to leave. More and more people have come to rely on international agencies and NGOs to meet their most basic needs, and the compulsory withdrawal of UN and humanitarian agencies denies them that lifeline.

**Keith Vaz** (Leicester, East) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing the debate. The situation is a catastrophe now. Only today, the PEARAA’RU bridge was blown up by the Sri Lankan Government. That was the one route whereby humanitarian aid was being taken into Vanni. Is it not time for the British Government to act, either by themselves or in co-ordination with the European Union, to tell the Sri Lankan Government that they must stop the bombing of innocent Tamils?

**Joan Ryan:** I hope that that is exactly the point that will be most clearly heard by the Minister in today’s debate.

I shall return to focusing on health care, particularly in relation to what my right hon. Friend has just mentioned. The conflict has not yet precipitated a large-scale epidemic, but with the start of the monsoon season, that remains a real threat, particularly if the violence is prolonged or conditions deteriorate further. Given what my right hon. Friend has said, we can expect that to be the case.

Against the backdrop of endemic shortages in medical supplies and staff, and with local facilities in the Vanni region already overstretched and struggling to cope with the burden of war casualties, the role of international aid agencies in the provision of medical treatment becomes even more important. Forcing them to withdraw leaves the Tamils in the precarious position of facing increasing demand for medical treatment and falling capacity to meet that need. Only two weeks ago, Médecins sans Frontières was forced to withdraw from Kilinochchi, despite the fact that there are only 17 qualified doctors working in the whole of the Vanni region.

As with medical services, so too with food supplies. I know that, at the end of September, the British Tamils Forum took up that issue with my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury, in his previous capacity as an International Development Minister. Forced to leave their homes and jobs, thousands are now unable to earn a living. That, coupled with rising food prices—they have risen by 50 per cent. this year alone—and a shortfall in the domestic supply of rice, which is the staple food of islanders, means that the Tamils face a severe food shortage and the prospect of malnutrition and even starvation, without even the assistance of international aid agencies, on which they could previously rely for food.

If the situation in the Vanni region is almost unrelentingly bleak, so too are its future prospects. Figures that I have obtained from Save the Children indicate that more than 30,000 schoolchildren from 154 schools have been displaced and denied any prospect of an education or

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a future. They have been denied access to schooling and care that was previously provided by international aid agencies, and I fear that another generation will grow up knowing nothing but the grim reality of war.

It is also clear that the time to act is now, before the crisis descends into catastrophe, although given what we have heard today, we are now on the brink of that catastrophe.

**Mr. Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing the debate and on her speech. Although we are seeing a catastrophe unfold and we need urgent action both from the British Government and the international community in putting pressure on the Sri Lankan Government, this is a story that many of us have watched unfolding for several years now, with the Sri Lankan Government's unwillingness to allow human rights groups to monitor the undermining of human rights in the Tamil communities and Tamil area of the island. Does the right hon. Lady agree that it is time that the British Government take a much stronger line against the Colombo Government on their failure to allow even human rights monitoring of the conflict in the north and east of the island?

**Joan Ryan:** We are here today to urge the British Government to say and do more. That is undoubtedly the truth, but I also think that the British Government have raised their voice on these matters and it is incumbent on all parties in the House to do that together. It is clear that we are on the brink of catastrophe. That is why the timing of the debate is very important. If the international aid agencies cannot do so, who will ensure that the Tamils have somewhere to sleep, something to eat, access to health services and some security? I fear that it will not be the Government of Sri Lanka, as the hon. Gentleman points out.

I am grateful to the high commissioner for providing me with an accurate and up-to-date briefing on the situation. I was pleased to note his acknowledgement that the conflict cannot be solved through military means. He also reaffirmed his full commitment to finding a lasting political solution. I know that hon. Members endorse that position as being eminently sensible, and that point has been made time and again in previous debates.

None the less, it seems to me that the Sri Lankan Government's priority is not to address the humanitarian situation or to work to restore the ceasefire but, on the back of their military successes in the east, to achieve a decisive military victory in the north. Forced withdrawal can be understood only in the broader context of what Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and International Crisis Group have described as

"a quite deliberate and sustained government campaign to vilify and intimidate international agencies and their staff".

That the press is not free in Sri Lanka is well known. Dissenting voices are frequently subject to harassment, physical attacks and even assassination. Less well known is the fact that international aid agencies are subject to similar pressures. In preparing for today's debate, I spoke with a number of aid agency representatives, and I was shocked but not surprised by their reluctance to speak out publicly on the situation in the north, in part for fear of Government reprisals. However, in addition to their vital humanitarian functions, the agencies act as the eyes of the world. In August alone, some 1,750 people in the Vanni contacted the International Committee of the Red Cross to make allegations of human rights abuses.

Provoked by suicide bombs, freed from the constraining gaze of the international community and emboldened by their apparent successes in the east, I fear that the Government of Sri Lanka may have deceived themselves into believing that they can press home their advantage with a decisive military victory in the north, and thereby achieve a permanent solution. However, there can be no military solution. Until the underlying political grievances are addressed, some form of violent resistance is almost certain. The Government of Sri Lanka cannot indefinitely control and pacify the Tamil areas in the north.

The only long-term solution will be a political one, achieved through inclusive political negotiations that satisfy the legitimate aspirations of all communities in Sri Lanka. In short, it means genuine devolution to the Tamil-speaking areas in the north and the east. Genuine negotiations can begin only when a ceasefire has been established, so restoration of the ceasefire must be an urgent priority for the Government of Sri Lanka.

**Stephen Pound** (Ealing, North) (Lab): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. I feel guilty at interrupting her flow. We are listening to her with great admiration and sympathy.

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On 30 September, my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury, then a Minister in the Department for International Development, had a meeting with members of the Tamil forum about the crisis in Kilinochchi. The Government said that they wished to send aid, including the vital snake bite serum, directly to that area. If that cannot be provided through NGOs, it must be provided through local Tamil organisations. Does my right hon. Friend believe that that is the way to proceed?

**Joan Ryan:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. I hope that the Minister will soon be able to shed some light on the matter.

I have no doubt that the previous ceasefire was inconsistent, imperfect and ultimately flawed, but it was a basis for progress. Under that ceasefire, proposals were made for proper devolution and an autonomous Tamil province. Only under a ceasefire can meaningful negotiations proceed and a solution be found. However, although such a prospect is obviously urgent it seems more distant than ever. Meanwhile, suffering in the Vanni region continues unabated. Any approach must therefore be two-fold. On one hand, urgent action must be taken to tackle the immediate humanitarian situation. In my view, that must include the Government allowing access for aid organisations and ensuring that aid reaches those who need it. On the other, the Government of Sri Lanka, being the party that formally withdrew from the agreement, must make a genuine and sustained effort to re-establish a ceasefire, stem the increase in violence, and return to talks about peace.

In this, on the 60th anniversary of the independence of Ceylon from the United Kingdom, the case for a just settlement in Sri Lanka seems more urgent than ever, and the peace dividends more appealing than ever—a peace not for the Tamils, nor for the Sinhalese, but for Sri Lanka.

1.15 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Michael Foster):** I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, North (Joan Ryan) for her kind words on my debut. I congratulate her on securing this timely debate, and I applaud her long-standing interest in the subject.

Since Labour came to power in 1997, there has been a marked change in the United Kingdom's commitment to international development. We have taken the lead in international efforts to tackle global poverty, driven by our desire to see social justice and equality on a global scale. Since the Department for International Development was created in 1997, it has become a world-renowned development agency and a key actor in the global system. By 2010, the Government will have trebled the aid budget in real terms since 1997 and put the UK on course to deliver the United Nations gold standard by spending 0.7 per cent. of gross national income on aid by 2013, which is two years ahead of the European target.

Throughout today's debate, concerns have been expressed about the conflict in Sri Lanka and its impact on the civilian population. Although the world is understandably focused on the global financial situation, we cannot ignore the plight of the most vulnerable. There is a real risk that efforts to eradicate global poverty will be undermined by global financial and commodity price crises, threatening progress made on meeting the UN's millennium development goals that aim to make poverty history. It is essential that we keep up our efforts.

The Government share the grave concern about the prospects for peace in Sri Lanka, the humanitarian situation there, the decline in respect for human rights and the impact that the conflict is having on Sri Lanka's development, including slowing the recovery from the tsunami of December 2004.

**Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on his new job, and I apologise for not being here at the start of the debate. I had to find another room for those who cannot get into the Public Gallery, which shows the strength of feeling of the mainly Tamil community represented in all our constituencies.

Many of those who come to my advice surgery are concerned about relatives or friends being injured while in Sri Lanka. Many are concerned that that will happen through the use of weapons sold by our Government or one of our allies. I would be grateful if the Minister and his colleagues in the Ministry of Defence did everything possible to ensure that that was not the case.

**Mr. Foster:** I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. She will, of course, be aware that any arms sales from the UK are subject to export licences and the rigorous tests that is applied as a result.

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Although the Government of Sri Lanka have the responsibility of defending themselves against terrorism, they also have the challenge of delivering a political settlement that will meet the legitimate aspirations of Sri Lanka's different ethnic groups. Unfortunately, that is still a long way off.

**Barry Gardiner:** I add my congratulations to those of other hon. Members. I am delighted to see my hon. Friend in his place today. Will he take the opportunity to condemn the remarks of Lieutenant-General Fonseka, who was recently reported as saying that he strongly believes that

"this country belongs to the Sinhalese."

He said:

"We being the majority in the country, 75 per cent., we will never give in and we have the right to protect this country."

Is not that exactly the sort of remark that feeds the problem, and does it not show the intransigence of the Sinhalese Government?

**Mr. Foster:** We have made it clear that we do not believe that there is a military solution to the conflict, and that a sustainable solution to Sri Lanka's conflict can emerge only from a just political settlement that involves all the communities there.

The total number of internally displaced persons in Sri Lanka is estimated at 500,000. The worst off are the approximately 220,000 people who have repeatedly been displaced by the conflict in the north over the past year, including at least 30,000 who have been displaced an average of five times. Those desperate people fear both sides in the conflict and have barely enough food to survive on. As we have heard, they are made more vulnerable and less able to cope each time they are driven out of their homes.

All UN agencies and NGOs left the area last month after the Government requested their withdrawal, stating that their security could no longer be guaranteed. The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent remain in the area and are critical to the protection of the population. We welcome the stated commitment of the Government of Sri Lanka to allow humanitarian access and regular convoys of essential supplies to the north, and acknowledge the value of the continued international presence of the ICRC in the Vanni region. We are urging the Government of Sri Lanka to facilitate the work of other impartial humanitarian actors to enable them to deal with the growing crisis.

**Andrew George (St. Ives) (LD):** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr. Foster:** I should like to make a little bit more progress.

The UK monitors the situation in Sri Lanka constantly and has increased its humanitarian aid in the light of circumstances on the ground. We provided more than £532,000 for conflict related activities in 2006, an additional £1 million in 2007, and £250,000 in January this year. Only a few weeks ago, we sent a humanitarian expert to assess the situation and to see what further help is needed. On the basis of his findings in Vavuniya and Jaffna, I am pleased to announce that DFID is providing an additional £2.5 million to support the efforts of the ICRC and other UN agencies and NGOs. Part of that funding will go to the north and part to the ICRC and UN High Commissioner for Refugees to support their work in other conflict-affected areas of Sri Lanka, including the Jaffna peninsular and the east of the country.

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**Andrew George:** I went to Sri Lanka in early April and was privileged to visit the north of the country. When the President came to this country in June, I had the opportunity to ask him about the role of Sri Lankan and international NGOs and human rights monitors. His attitude worries me. He believes that the majority of Sri Lanka-based NGOs are in fact fronts for the Tamil Tigers, and that international NGOs and human rights monitors are involved in gun running for them. If that is the attitude of the Sri Lankan Government, does the Minister agree that the international community needs to be a great deal more forthright to ensure proper monitoring and humanitarian relief?

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**Mr. Foster:** I am coming to that very point right now.

The Government welcome the commitment of the Government of Sri Lanka to protect civilian populations and have continued to lobby for all parties in the conflict to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law. Those include the protection of the civilian population and humanitarian workers, the preservation of humanitarian space, and ensuring free and unfettered access to all affected areas by neutral, impartial humanitarian actors. Unless those basic requirements are met, funding will not ease the plight of IDPs and other vulnerable residents.

**Barry Gardiner:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr. Foster:** No. I should like to make a little more progress and my hon. Friend has already had one bite of the cherry.

The Government are doing all we can to help to build the foundations for a lasting peace in difficult circumstances. We have created an innovative political and development section in the high commission in Colombo, which works in tandem with the defence section to promote peace building in Sri Lanka, using funds from the UK's conflict prevention pool. Funding from the CPP for projects in 2008–09 will be some £2 million.

The impact of the conflict builds on the suffering of a nation that is still recovering from the impact of the tsunami four years ago, which killed 35,000 people and displaced more than 500,000. Some good progress has been made on post-tsunami reconstruction.

**Keith Vaz:** Before the Minister talks about the tsunami, a simple message could be sent to the Sri Lankan Government. We are giving aid because they have displaced all those people, and the simple message from the British Government should be, "Stop the bombing of the innocent Tamils." Why are we not sending that message to the Sri Lankan Government?

**Mr. Foster:** I pointed to post-tsunami reconstruction as an example of the conflict harming the Sri Lankan people whom my right hon. Friend wants to help.

**Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) (PC):** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr. Foster:** I should like to make some more progress.

Post-tsunami, approximately 75 per cent. of people have regained livelihoods, and progress is being made on improved education and health facilities. According to Sri Lankan Government figures, about 98 per cent. of the permanent housing requirement in the south has been fulfilled, although in the east there are still significant shortfalls, and the conflict is further threatening the situation.

As the intensity of the fighting has risen, the space in which humanitarian agencies can operate has been constricted. Both the Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam must ensure that humanitarian agencies may have full access to civilians in need of support and respect their neutrality.

Much has been said about human rights. In areas under LTTE control, there is no tolerance for dissent or freedom of expression. The LTTE needs to develop its role as a credible partner for peace. It cannot continue to persecute people simply because they have opposing views. Similarly, in the south, there have been restrictions on the freedom of expression, with journalists and newspaper distribution agents intimidated and sometimes killed. Three democratically elected MPs have been killed in the past few years, and many ordinary people have been reported as disappeared or have simply been killed.

The EU notes with concern the trend in attacks and threats on journalists, civil society organisations and lawyers. As far back as 2006, Louise Arbour, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, was sufficiently concerned to call on the international community to monitor the unfolding human rights situation, suggesting that the events were not simply ceasefire violations, but grave breaches of international human rights and humanitarian law. That situation remains.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

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**Mr. Foster:** I am limited for time and would like to say more.

I am sure that the House agrees that one of the most abhorrent human rights abuses is the continued recruitment of children to fight. We urge all organisations that undertake that practice to stop, and we will continue to work with the Government of Sri Lanka and UNICEF to protect children from forced recruitment and other human rights abuses.

**Mr. Llwyd:** Is it not high time that the matter was discussed at the UN, at the highest possible level? Cataloguing the disasters is not taking us further. The Government are working on the issue, but it would be far better to go straight to the UN to have the matter thrashed out internationally.

**Mr. Foster:** I shall reflect on the implications of the hon. Gentleman's point.

There is an urgent need to deal with the current crisis, but we also need to consider the future. Even if the hundreds of thousands affected by conflict survive and return to their homes, they would face a long struggle to regain their lives and livelihoods after not months, but decades, of conflict. In Sri Lanka, violent conflict has denied people their rights to live without fear, to health and education and to economic opportunity—it has denied them a future. Parts of Sri Lanka, particularly the capital, benefit from strong development, but inequalities elsewhere are rising.

**Joan Ryan:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr. Foster:** I am running out of time.

In conclusion, the situation in Sri Lanka is grave, but we stand ready to support the Sri Lankan people in building a long term, sustainable and equitable peace. That is the most effective way to fight poverty and to ensure that the country and its people meet their development goals. Sri Lanka has been a country of huge but unfulfilled potential for far too long. Our greatest wish for Sri Lanka is that it finds a peaceful solution to the conflict. Despite the current fighting, opportunities for peace can still be grasped, and we will continue to search for that peace.

I should point out—

**John Cummings** (in the Chair): Order. Time is up, but the Minister who is replying to the next debate is not here.

**Joan Ryan:** May I speak?

**John Cummings** (in the Chair): No, this debate is over.

**- Ends -**

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## **Notes to Editors:**

**British Tamils Forum** exists to harness the skills and the knowledge of the members of the forum, well-wishers and significant others including mainstream decision makers in the UK with the aim of alleviating the sufferings of the Tamils community in the Island of Sri Lanka and to further their right to self determination within a democratic frame work under pinned by international law, its covenants and conventions. The forum was set-up in 2006 when, with the support 88 British Tamil community organisations, it also published an open letter in the Times newspaper. For more information [admin@tamilsforum.com](mailto:admin@tamilsforum.com) and/or visit: [www.tamilsforum.com](http://www.tamilsforum.com)