

OPINION

Political ...

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munities. 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 cannot 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 experi-

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'If history is forgotten, reconciliation is not possible,' David Miliband told attendees at the GTF launch

Meaningful political ...

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committed by all parties in the conflict. Restoring accountability and justice are vital steps towards healing a divided nation and people.

Although Presidential elections were held last month and Parliamentary elections will follow in April, elections alone do not signal the existence of a fully functioning democratic system. Respect for human rights, is a crucial pillar upon which any democracy is built, and we do have long-standing concerns about the human rights situation in Sri Lanka. Of particular concern is freedom of expression: including that of the national press, and the freedom to lawfully dissent. The arrest of the Opposition Presidential candidate, General Fonseka, earlier this month was regarded by us as an alarming and serious deterioration in an already difficult situation. It is our belief that the General must be given a fair trial in a civil court where the charges against him can be tested in accordance with the rule of law and along with the rest of the international community we will be watching his trial closely. Sri Lanka has been proud in the past of its democratic traditions and its vibrant multi-party system. In restricting such freedoms the government is in grave danger of squandering a precious opportunity to overcome division and conflict and to establish conditions for stable peace.

Let me be clear to you today that the position of the Conservative Party is that we fully support the European Commission's actions over Sri Lanka's GSP+ trade agreement –

from its preliminary report in October 2009 to its most recent decision to suspend the agreement due to human rights concerns. However, the door remains open for Sri Lanka to be reinstated in the programme. Over the next six months we very much hope that the Sri Lankan government will demonstrate rapid and sustainable progress in the areas which the European Commission has identified: such as the effective implementation of the Convention against Torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; the Covenant on Civil or Political Rights; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In addition I would like to say a few words about my colleague Dr Liam Fox's proposal to establish an independent international fund to help provide basic infrastructure for reconstruction in the northern and eastern areas of the country. Dr Fox is a long-standing friend of Sri Lanka and his plan has the support of religious leaders and parties across the political spectrum in Sri Lanka, in addition to representatives of the Tamil community in this country. A memorandum of understanding has been signed and further details about the fund will be unveiled shortly. It is our hope that this fund will provide a vehicle through which the international diaspora of Sri Lankans are able to contribute and that it will help to provide a better future for those in greatest need.

We must also not forget that the Commonwealth, an organisation of which Sri Lanka has been a valued member since it joined upon gaining independence in 1948, has a role to play. I have long argued that the

Commonwealth has been much neglected under the present Labour government but with 2 billion people representing all major faiths, and spanning five continents and three oceans, it is an unique forum and can provide a diverse contribution to world affairs. The Commonwealth is ideally placed to help member countries such as Sri Lanka in post-conflict rehabilitation and development given its considerable expertise and we look forward to the Secretariat, its members, and its vast network of civil society groups assisting the government and people of Sri Lankan government to this effect. Whilst we support the Commonwealth's decision to decline Sri Lanka's bid to host the Heads of Government meeting in 2011 due to human rights concerns, I am certain that this organisation will provide constructive support to those parties working to achieve a sustainable peace in the country.

Sri Lanka should now be able to emerge from a very difficult period in its recent history and we believe reconciliation and genuine political reform should begin in earnest.

I would like to wish the Global Tamil Forum every success in its endeavour to bring about positive change in Sri Lanka and I am sure that the considerable resourcefulness and energy of the Tamil diaspora around the world will be crucial in this task.

We all wish to see Sri Lanka live up to its potential of being a prosperous, stable and dynamic country, built upon freedom, openness and respect for human rights and we very much hope that all Sri Lankans will be able to share equally in its future.