

ශ්‍රී ලංකා තානාපති කායාලය
අමෙරිකා එක්සත් ජනපදය
இலங்கைத் தூதரகம்
ஐக்கிய அமெரிக்க நாடுகள்

EMBASSY OF SRI LANKA
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



3025 Whitehaven Street NW
Washington D.C. 20008

Tel (202) 483-4025 Information
(202) 483-4026/4028 Staff

Fax (202) 232-7181

E-mail slembassy@slembassyusa.org

April 23, 2018

Rep. Bill Johnson
U.S. House of Representatives
1710 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-3506

Dear Congressman Johnson,

I have learnt that you will be hosting a panel discussion on Sri Lanka on April 26, 2018. I take this opportunity to welcome most warmly, the interest that you continue to demonstrate in Sri Lanka and I am most encouraged by your support for the reconciliation process that the current government has undertaken along with measures for strengthening good governance and the rule of law. In this context, I would like to brief you on matters pertaining to recent developments in Sri Lanka especially as we have observed some disturbing inaccuracies in the text of the invitation that has been circulated for the panel discussion that is to be held on April 26th.

The recent incidents in some areas of Sri Lanka, specifically Digana and Ampara, are of serious concern to us and the government does not, in any way, condone the incidents that took place. In fact, as the Minister of Foreign Affairs stated in his address to the UN Human Rights Council on March 21st 2018,

"As a nation we are pained by the recent incidents in a few areas of Sri Lanka targeting members of the Muslim community who represent an integral part of the pluralistic society of Sri Lanka. Such acts which go against our shared vision of a Sri Lanka where equal rights and rule of law are guaranteed for all, have no place in a democratic, pluralistic society. The government has taken swift action against perpetrators of these incidents and is investigating any lapses that may have taken place. Stringent measures will be initiated to ensure non-recurrence. A victim compensation programme has already commenced."

Several arrests have been made already and action is being taken in accordance with the rule of law with the firm determination of ensuring non-recurrence. As it was discovered that social media and messaging platforms were being used not only to incite and spread hate and false messages but also to organise attacks, the government was compelled to impose temporary restrictions on the use of social media. All these restrictions have now been lifted. The government as a result of this experience has entered into active engagement with social media operators, especially Facebook, to work with them on the prevention of hate speech. The government also imposed emergency regulations on March 6, 2018 as a measure to protect communities. This was a temporary preventive measure and the regulations were rescinded on March 17, 2018.

There were innumerable instances where the public came forth to protect the Muslim community as well during the incidents. In fact one roadside restaurant that was damaged was renovated and re-opened by the following evening by members of the Sinhala community coming to the assistance of the Muslim owners. There were Buddhist priests who went to mosques to express solidarity and provide protection to the Muslim community at prayer on the Friday of the week that the incidents occurred.

To term the incidents of violence caused by the actions of a few as an "anti-Muslim pogrom" is a gross misrepresentation of what transpired. The government took immediate action to put a halt to the unrest and the tense situation was brought under control in a span of a few days and the damaged properties are now in the process of being rebuilt and renovated. Following the incidents, religious and community leaders from the

Sinhala and Muslim communities across the country continue to work together to complement government efforts to enhance understanding and dialogue and prevent incidents of this nature from recurring.

We observe that the text of the invitation does not accurately reflect the background of the thirty-year armed conflict and the efforts taken by the present government in the last three years to foster reconciliation among the communities. **Sri Lanka is not plagued by religious or ethnic violence. Religion was not a root cause for the conflict that ended in 2009.** In fact it was the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam/Tamil Tigers (LTTE) that evicted the Muslim population from the Northern Province within a few hours, in October 1990 in an act amounting to ethnic cleansing.

Sri Lanka takes pride in its multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural society spanning generations in Sri Lanka's history and enriching Sri Lanka's culture and traditions. Tamils and Muslims live amicably in Sri Lanka, transacting their daily business on a day-to-day basis in all parts of the country, and in fact, minority communities outnumber the majority Sinhalese in several cities including Colombo, the country's capital. **These communities have always had the freedom to express their cultural identities and religious beliefs even during the years of the conflict.** The government and the cabinet of ministers also consist of Muslim political leaders, and the current leader of the opposition in Parliament is a well-respected senior Tamil politician from the Tamil National Alliance.

The armed conflict that arose as a result of terrorism with the main terrorist group (the LTTE) proscribed by U.S. authorities, ended in May 2009 and the present government following the January 8, 2015 Presidential Election in the country is working with the local communities as well as bilateral partners and international organisations to institutionalize reform and address anomalies that occurred in the past, aimed at guiding Sri Lanka towards sustainable peace, reconciliation, stability and prosperity. This includes two comprehensive island-wide processes of consultations that have been carried out in the country for the first time – one on transitional justice processes carried out by a committee comprising leading civil society representatives in the country, and the other on constitutional reform – as the government firmly recognizes the need for bottom-up processes involving all citizens in order to ensure that reform processes are firmly entrenched and institutionalized. The constitutional reform process involves all members of Parliament from all communities. **The reference to "continued conflict on the island" in the invitation for the panel discussion therefore is factually incorrect.**

The international and local media are allowed to operate in Sri Lanka without any restrictions and the government has ensured transparency including through the Right to Information Act that was enacted by the Sri Lanka Parliament and made operational in February 2017. Sri Lanka has ongoing constructive engagement with its partners in the international community in achieving its goals of reconciliation amongst the diverse communities and a prosperous future for all its citizens.

We encourage conversation, dialogue, discussion, and debate among all, both within and outside the country. However, we feel that all these discussions, debates and dialogues need to be cognizant of the sensitive and challenging nature of the reform processes that are underway in Sri Lanka at this time following three decades of conflict involving separatist terrorism that has not left any community in the country untouched.

Therefore, it is important that discussions focused on supporting the ongoing reform, peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts in Sri Lanka should leave no room to drive wedges between the country's different communities. Any attempt to do so, even inadvertently, would only do a tremendous injustice to the peace loving people of the country, who are the clear majority that yearn for a peaceful, stable, reconciled and prosperous nation.

Sincerely,



Priyanga Wickramasinghe
Chargé d'affaires a.i.