

Australian Tamil Congress

A Unified Voice for All Tamils



19 July 2010

Given your interest in the Tamil issue, we wish to update you on developments within the island of Sri Lanka and abroad.

As the asylum seeker issue becomes part of the election campaign, one has to wonder if Australia openly putting pressure on Sri Lanka to [deal with the root of cause](#) may be a better option to decrease the number of people fleeing from Sri Lanka on boats.

18 May 2010 marked a year since Sri Lanka declared an end to the war. Coinciding with this, [Human Rights Watch](#) and the [International Crisis Group](#) released independent reports on alleged war crimes in Sri Lanka, consisting of eye witness testimonies and photographs. In addition to this, [video footage](#) of admissions by a Sri Lankan army commander and a frontline soldier was reported by Britain based Channel 4 News reinforcing these allegations.

This month, the European Union (EU) [withdrew its trade benefits](#) after the Sri Lanka [refused to improve](#) its appalling human rights record.

Earlier this year, the United Nations (UN) Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon [announced](#) his intention to appoint a panel of experts to advise him on Sri Lanka's human rights accountability. Sri Lanka rejected this, declaring it had no "[moral justification](#)". Last month, he finally announced the names of a three-member [UN expert advisory panel](#). Sri Lanka was quick to respond by blocking the members of the UN panel from visiting the island, announcing it would [not issue](#) them with visas to the country.

Tensions continued to escalate and a fortnight ago, a mob of protesters brought the [UN head office in Sri Lanka under siege](#), refusing to allow UN workers within the office to leave. The war cry was led by none other than Sri Lanka's own Cabinet Minister, Wimal Weerawansa, who [burned an effigy](#) of the UN Secretary-General in the streets. As the police struggled to maintain control, using Weerawansa's mobile phone, Sri Lankan Defence Secretary (and brother of the President) Gotabaya Rajapakse ordered the police to leave the scene. The police obediently followed. Weerawansa then commenced a "fast unto death", which he [broke after a mere 3 days](#).

Calling the protests "unruly" and the authorities' lack of action "unacceptable", the UN [closed its office](#) and [withdrew its top envoy](#) to Sri Lanka for fear of its staff's security. To date, nine countries and the EU have [issued statements](#) reporting they were "dismayed" by the events.

Australian Tamil Congress

A Unified Voice for All Tamils



The [protesters' demand](#) - the UN should cancel its inquiry into Sri Lanka's war crimes accountability.

Ironically, the very same week, [UNHCR released a report](#) on Sri Lanka claiming the security situation in Sri Lanka was improving. The report however did note that certain groups continued to be at grave risk in Sri Lanka. This included former members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, with allegations continuing to surface of [abuse in detention](#).

In addition to Sri Lanka's acts of defiance to a war crimes probe, there are also concerns of the safety of eye witnesses to war crimes who could provide testimonies. Recently, Sri Lanka [threatened to execute](#) the former army commander if he continued to suggest top government officials may have been involved in war crimes.

There have also been claims by independent experts that Sri Lanka is engaging in ways to [stop potential witnesses](#) to war crimes from fleeing the island and reaching our shores, including by [slandering Tamil asylum seekers](#) and [engaging in scare tactics](#).

As international pressure for an independent body to investigate war crimes and human rights violations in Sri Lanka continues to mount, it is vital that [Australia adds its voice](#) to this call. A global effort to pressure Sri Lanka into improving its human rights record may also see the number of asylum seekers from that island decreasing.

The Australian Tamil Congress calls for the Australian policy makers to pressure Sri Lanka to take genuine steps in ensuring long term peace is restored for all citizens on the island.