House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

FAAE • NUMBER 012 • 2nd SESSION • 40th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Monday, March 30, 2009

Chair

Mr. Kevin Sorenson

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC)): Good afternoon.

This is meeting number 12 of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, on Monday, March 30, 2009. We will continue with our hearings on the situation in Sri Lanka.

In our first hour we have Mr. Bruce Matthews, professor emeritus at Acadia University, and also Mr. David Cameron, professor of political science at the University of Toronto. We welcome you here today, and we thank you for coming to Ottawa and to our committee to testify.

As you know, our committee provides an opportunity for each witness to give an opening statement of approximately 10 minutes. Then we will go into our first round of questioning.

Perhaps, Mr. Cameron, we will begin with you. Thank you for being here.

Professor David R. Cameron (Chair, Department of Political Science, University of Toronto): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate the invitation to appear before you to discuss Sri Lanka.

I'm sure many of your witnesses have spoken to you about the large number of Sri Lankan citizens who are suffering and are in terrible danger as we speak, caught between the LTTE and government forces in the conflict zone in Mullaitivu.

Rather than speaking further about this and running the risk of repeating what others have said, I thought it might be of more use to the committee if I were to talk a bit about the longer-term challenges in Sri Lanka—on the reasonable assumption that the Tigers will soon be conclusively defeated on the battlefield—what might happen, what should happen after the conflict is over, and what useful role Canada might play in these circumstances.

Let me begin by briefly describing my experience with Sri Lanka and providing a bit of background for my thoughts on the future. I went to Sri Lanka in the spring of 2002, just a few months after the ceasefire agreement was signed between the then-UNP government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE. As the two parties began their peace talks, many people believed that turning Sri Lanka into a federation might contribute to the achievement of a stable and just peace by giving the Tamil community in the north a degree of self-determination within a united Sri Lanka.

I sit on the board of the Forum of Federations, an international network of federal countries founded by Canada in the late 1990s. Under its auspices, Bob Rae and I—Mr. Rae was not then in politics—went to Sri Lanka many times to offer support and advice to both the government and the Tigers, and to mount educational and training sessions for civil society groups.

We met regularly with G.L. Peiris, the government minister responsible for leading the talks, as well as with other government officials and party leaders, and with the Tiger leadership—Anton Balasingham, S.P. Thamilchelvan, V. Muralitharan, known by his *nom de guerre*, Colonel Karuna—in Killinochi and elsewhere.

Mr. Balasingham, suffering from ill health, died in December of 2006. Mr. Thamilchelvan was killed near Killinochi in a targeted government air raid in the autumn of 2007. And Colonel Karuna, the LTTE's top military commander in the east, split from the Tigers in 2004, fracturing their unity and greatly weakening the LTTE position and its clout. He is now Minister of National Integration and Reconciliation in the current government of Sri Lanka.

Mr. Rae and I attended four of the six rounds of peace talks, the last of which was held in Japan in 2003, and we continued with missions to Sri Lanka for some time after that. I've not been back to Sri Lanka for several years, but I follow events there closely.

Little progress was made during the peace process, and I believe the talks fizzled because neither side was prepared to make the painful compromises that would have been necessary to achieve a just settlement and to set the country on a new course.

The Tigers showed little disposition to accepting the realities of democratic government in a free society. They continued to smuggle arms, abduct civilians from military service, and murder political competitors and government officials. The government, for its part, seemed incapable of capitalizing on the opportunity it had created, of driving the negotiation process forward, of persuading the majority Sinhalese community that significant change was going to be a necessary but worthwhile price for a stable peace.

The current government, headed by President Mahinda Rajapaksa, has been skeptical of the peace process from day one and takes the view that military force is the only way of dealing with the LTTE and ending the conflict. Aided by the split between the LTTE and Colonel Karuna's faction in the east, plus the demise of several of the Tigers' top leadership, the government has been winning on the battlefield and is within an ace of conclusively defeating the Tigers.

Unquestionably, this is a considerable achievement after 25 years of civil war, but success brings its own challenges and concerns. The battlefield defeat of the LTTE may not put an end to the acts of terrorism that have blighted many parts of the island.

● (1535)

These may prove very difficult to suppress. On the evidence of the March 10 bomb blast at a mosque south of Colombo, which killed 14 people and wounded 46, the Tigers, even if they are in their death throes, have not lost their capacity to commit awful acts of terrorism.

What is more, the battlefield defeat of the LTTE may be regarded by many Sri Lankans, and possibly by the government, as the end of the road and a conclusion of the process rather than the start of a new and equally important process of national reconciliation. Having won the war, will the government be able and willing to make the peace? The prospects are far from promising. There is little in Sri Lanka's history, and not much in the composition and leadership of the current government, to encourage optimism. Several Sri Lankan governments in the past have been given an opportunity to bind up the wounds of division. None has show much determination or taste for it. The present government is heavily reliant on Sinhalese nationalist support. What lessons are the nationalists likely to draw from the pending historic victory? They have always believed that Sri Lanka is for the Sinhalese. Defeating the Tigers will just confirm it.

To be sure, President Rajapaksa has spoken of social justice and of the need to heal the wounds of war. In a speech on February 4 he declared that it is the task of the entire nation to extend to “the people of the north...the kindness, friendship and prosperity they deserve”. The president urges his fellow Sri Lankans to act “with the dignity of a citizen who equally loves the Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Burgher, Malay, and all others who make up our nation”, yet he is committed to the “unitary nature of the state”—and there's the rub. If the nation is composed of all these communities, why is there so little concrete expression of that fact in the affairs of state?

For a great many of the president's supporters, Sir Lanka is not a multicultural society but a single Sinhalese nation with several small minority groups. Government documents are typically issued only in Sinhalese. There are few Tamil-speaking officials. There are repeated reports of racial profiling by the predominantly Sinhalese police force. These realities will be damnably difficult to change because they emanate from a spiritual and ideological source. The rock of identity for a large proportion of Sri Lankan Sinhalese is the conviction that their society is unitary, not plural, and even 25 years of civil war seem not to have changed that. Indeed, for many of these Sri Lankans the battlefield victory will be a triumphant confirmation of that fact.

Appropriate action at war's end depends on a recognition of the justice of the claims, not of the LTTE but of the Tamil and Muslim minorities. After all, you have to acknowledge that something is broken before you can try to fix it. One might hope that the defeat of the LTTE would allow Sri Lanka to tackle its deep ethnic divisions and begin the hard task of delivering a measure of justice to its Tamil and Muslim minorities.

Alas, I fear that is unlikely to happen, in part because it would involve profound and extensive reform of the Sri Lankan political order and also because it would entail an assault on the cherished identity and self-perception of the majority.

In these circumstances, what might Canada do to support reconciliation and reconstruction in post-conflict Sri Lanka? The first thing I think is for Canada and Canadians to be realistic about their potential influence. The Sri Lankan government is suspicious of foreign intervention and generally believes I think that much of what the international community has tried to do has in fact been unhelpful to the government and its central goals. Therefore, the space for creative international involvement post-conflict may be more limited than one would like.

Clearly, the very large Sir Lankan diaspora community in Canada is a highly significant potential resource to assist in the reconstruction and development of the war-ravaged regions of the country, particularly in the north. It is hard to imagine that Sri Lankan Canadians, most of them Tamils, will have much interest in returning to Sri Lanka or investing in its development if the island remains dominated by a Sinhalese majority flushed with the sense of victory over the LTTE.

In the earlier round of talks, as I have said, there was a genuine interest in exploring the devolution of political power, including federal models as a way of accommodating Tamil aspirations for self-rule. It seems to me to be unlikely in the extreme that President Rajapaksa's government will have any interest in following this course of action. International policy support in aid of this goal, therefore, is likely to be unwanted.

● (1540)

In the light of this bleak analysis, what are we left with? Economic development is one thing, as well as assistance in repairing and improving the social and economic infrastructure that has been neglected or ravaged by war, especially in the north and the east of the country. That's desperately needed and is probably something the government would be glad to have help with.

Just as important, but more problematic in its reception, would be governance support. Sri Lanka would not win any prizes for good governance. Freedom House designates it as only partially free, and the country ranks 92nd in Transparency International's 2008 corruption perception index, below Serbia, Senegal, Panama, and Madagascar.

Better government would benefit all Sri Lankans, whether they be Sinhalese, Muslim, or Tamil. Assuming they were welcomed by the government, programs to help Sri Lanka move in this direction would be very worthwhile.

Finally, given that the significant decentralization of power is not in the cards, programs that help the Sri Lankan government and its citizens to accommodate and develop respect for the cultural, religious, and linguistic pluralism that is embedded in their society would make a real contribution to the post-conflict world Sri Lanka is about to enter.

In this area, clearly Canada has a lot to offer. The question here, as elsewhere, though, is whether Sri Lanka wants to buy what Canada has to sell. These are all good ideas, I think, but if there is no market for them in the concrete reality of post-civil-war Sri Lanka, it's difficult to imagine they will have much bite or impact.

I have to say I feel badly about offering this gloomy assessment of the situation in Sri Lanka, but that's the way I see it. I'd be delighted to be proven wrong, but I greatly fear that's not likely to occur.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Cameron.

We'll move to Mr. Matthews.

Professor Bruce Matthews (Professor Emeritus, Acadia University): Like Professor Cameron, I want to thank the committee for inviting me to come to speak to you about Sri Lanka.

I'll give you a little bit of background. I went to graduate school there in 1970 as a Commonwealth fellow in Buddhist civilizations. In 1971, while I was still a student in Peradeniya, the first Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna insurrection broke out, caught me completely off guard, and basically turned my focus from Buddhist studies to contemporary sociological and political studies. I've ended up in that field over the last three decades and have written fairly extensively on it. I have also visited the country on a regular basis, most recently as a Canadian member of the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons, which met in Sri Lanka, basically, between January 2007 and April 2008. It was 14 months. I was there six times with that particular body, which, by the way, ended up as a failed initiative.

So that's part of my background. Let me look at my text, which I sent in. You may or may not have it in front of you, but I will use it as a sort of blueprint for where I want to go.

I was impressed by the magnitude of the recent demonstrations by aggrieved Ceylon Tamils in Toronto earlier this month. They were aimed, of course, in part, at raising Canadian public awareness of the Tamil predicament in the north of Sri Lanka, where, as we all know, there are many thousands of Tamil civilians trapped in a tightening military showdown between the army of the state and the LTTE. Those demonstrations, of course, were also a cry to the Canadian government and the international community. They were an urgent request to somehow become involved in providing those civilians safe conduct, and, by extension, to further the life of the LTTE as a possible political answer to Tamil demands for autonomy, if not outright sovereignty.

It's quite clear that the war is no longer insulated from the rest of the world, nor has it been for some time. The eyes of the world are focused on Sri Lanka. Accusations are being made by the international community that can't be brushed aside. In the short term, I don't think there's too much the international community can do, but there will of course be some observations I will want to add to Professor Cameron's about what Canada might get itself involved with, however indirectly.

Direct involvement in the Sri Lankan scenario by Canada or any other government is, arguably, not going to happen, despite our international consternation over the many abuses this civil war has provoked. Unless both sides of this conflict can come to some agreement about involving an outside agent to assist in mediation, which is unlikely, Sri Lanka, I would argue, needs to bring its civil war to a conclusion by itself. The limits of international engagement in situations in which human rights are in question is a pressing topic in many places. Sri Lanka is an urgent example of a country in need of mending its miserable record and poor global image on this matter.

None of this is sufficient to precipitate outside involvement in Sri Lanka's terrible predicament. It's not as if the international community hasn't tried to assist in an equitable end to this war. Professor Cameron has just mentioned the Forum of Federations, which did outstanding work there.

We could add to this that Nordic countries, in particular, gave leadership and support to two recent attempts. Norway facilitated peace talks in 2001, directly leading to a welcome ceasefire that lasted six years, although its third-party role was severely criticized by nationalists as being partial to the LTTE and by peace activists as not being stern enough.

● (1545)

A second venture, the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, originally composed of representatives of five Nordic countries, left Sri Lanka in January 2008, just before the last day of the six-year ceasefire agreement. Hence, I think this small but well-organized observer body did key, creditable work over a period of nearly a decade in the border areas between the warring parties. But they got little thanks for it.

A third attempt to reach out to Sri Lanka was through the Independent International Group of Eminent Persons, which in 2007 was invited by the Government of Sri Lanka to observe and monitor the deliberations of a presidential commission on human rights abuses. I will refer to it by its acronym, IIGEP, of which I was the Canadian representative. I resigned after 14 months in April of last year, having concluded that our advice was not welcome and was indeed ignored by the state. It's too bad that none of these initiatives succeeded. In 2005-06, the Aceh Monitoring Mission in Indonesia in 2005-06 produced very credible results, but this has seldom been the case in Sri Lanka.

Although the conflict is clearly one between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils, it is also much more than a simple ethnic dualism—a dualism sometimes referred to as the primordial ethnic struggle, the ethnic struggle between the monolithic aggressor and the monolithic victim. That it is not. The tragedy of Sri Lanka has been shaped by historical, territorial, and socio-economic forces, including colonialism, party politics, caste issues, and religion. Religion has been swept into the drama through a revival of Buddhist nationalism. This is compounded by Sri Lanka's lack of mature democratization. Since independence in 1948, democracy and the rule of law have never been a part of the intellectual focus. Both sides of the conflict continue to experience acute frustration.

The Government of Sri Lanka faces a severe security threat, which in principle it has a legitimate right to address. This was expressed last year by Yasantha Kodagoda, Sri Lanka's Deputy Attorney General at the Human Rights Council, Geneva, when he argued: "Mr. President, at a time when Sri Lanka's very existence as a unitary sovereign state is being seriously threatened by ruthless and dangerous terror, what, in fact, would you suggest the Sir Lankan government do other than exercise legitimate military action?"

I argue that this was and is a valid question. The state argues that the current civil war is justified because the LTTE is not prepared to seriously enter into negotiations, which they are not. The LTTE claims, with some good reason, that no credible political solution has been forthcoming from the state. There is not much Sinhalese public demand for military de-escalation as a means to obtain a cooperative response from the LTTE, and the war has no end in sight. Even if the LTTE collapses as a ground force, armed cadres will carry on asymmetric action for decades. I project 20 more years at least.

This is central to the tragedy. All non-militant policies have been subverted by extremist Sinhalese nationalism and the systematic elimination, over the last 25 years, of moderate politicians, both Sinhalese and Tamil, by the LTTE. Both ethnic communities have also faced decades of their own internal insurrections, sometimes based on caste and certainly on class struggles. This has hardened hearts to now commonplace violations and atrocities. In addition, the civil war has pressed both sides of the conflict into ideological and tactical corners, which continue to severely constrain human rights on both sides of Sri Lanka's conflict.

The international community needs to criticize this human rights abuse and offer assistance when it can. For instance, there was the Tokyo Donors Conference in 2003, and there may be a chance that it will be kick-started back into some kind of performance. But it would not be prudent, in my opinion, for the Government of Canada to become actively involved in allowing the LTTE to gain time and hope for their secessionist cause.

● (1550)

I'll end by raising just a few points that I think could be useful in pressing in the Canadian context. Some of these actually come from a humanitarian body in Sri Lanka that is made up largely of religious leaders, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, for that matter, and I think their list of observations is pertinent to what we might also reach out to.

First, continue steady food supplies through the World Food Programme as long as is necessary.

Second, continue the ferrying of the sick and injured persons through the ICRC to hospitals that are in a position to provide the necessary personnel and medicines to treat these people.

Third, negotiate and evacuate all civilians who wish to leave the conflict zone. For this purpose, a temporary so-called humanitarian pause, rather than a ceasefire, might be negotiated to enable that evacuation.

Fourth, I would also argue that the international community, certainly here in Canada, could engage in a dialogue with the LTTE branches abroad and in that way possibly bring forward some ideas from the Tamil community right here in Canada about what they might see as the possibility of a future without the LTTE, at least in its present form.

I have some other notes here, Mr. Chairman, about confidence-building measures in Sri Lanka and the lack of them, but I think I would leave that until a possible discussion brings them up.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Matthews.

We'll move into the first round.

Mr. Rae.

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): I'll share my time with my colleagues.

Just briefly, thank you both, Dr. Cameron and Dr. Matthews. I won't ask a question to Dr. Cameron because I feel I know him too well.

I would like particularly to ask Dr. Matthews if he could tell us a little bit more about his experience on IIGEP, because I think it might be beneficial for members to understand what that process was and what happened as a result of it.

● (1555)

Prof. Bruce Matthews: Thank you, Mr. Rae. I'd be glad to do so, in a sort of encapsulated form.

The Government of Sri Lanka invited IIGEP to come to Sri Lanka. It wasn't imposed on them. By the way, I'll say right now, in case I forget to say it later, that I think this is the last time any international body will be invited by the Government of Sri Lanka, at least under the Rajapaksa government.

That's because we did our work quite thoroughly, and it was found to be too hard for the government to swallow—what we were offering in terms of what we felt our mandate was. The mandate was to observe a committee struck in Sri Lanka of Sri Lankans, including three Sinhalese, two Ceylon Moors, and two Ceylon Tamils. So it was a multicultural panel. Many of them were lawyers. They were all distinguished people. They were all hard-working and certainly they were all honest. But they had a limited budget and they were very carefully controlled by the Attorney General's office.

The Attorney General in Sri Lanka should not have been a part of the commission of inquiry's work, which had, as its mandate, to find out why 16 particular atrocities had occurred. The commission of inquiry should have asked the question of the whole apparatus or system of state. What is it that failed in the state, its police, and its judiciary? Why did the police and judiciary fail in not being able to solve these human rights atrocities or abuses initially? And why have they been lingering in the background for three or four years and still haven't been solved?

Instead, that commission of inquiry got itself bogged down in trying to establish an initial prospect on all of these cases, not questioning why the system failed, but going back to square one and interviewing all the so-called witnesses from the original atrocities. This took endless time. Everything was done in English and had to be translated into Sinhala. I was the only person in the IIGEP who could speak Sinhala. So it was necessary to do this and make it available in English, yet that added 30% to our time. So the sessions became extremely tedious, and furthermore, they weren't going anywhere.

We would periodically give our advice. Every six weeks we would offer our advice to the commission of inquiry and we had two weeks in which they could respond. After they responded, we published our observations and they were in the press, and they were not always complimentary.

Some of these so-called atrocities involved just a single person, for instance, the assassination of Foreign Minister Kadirgamar. Some of them were huge cases, like the death of 137 sailors who were blown up at a bus stop near Dambulla.

But the one that was particularly poignant to us was the assassination of 17 aid workers for Action Contre la Faim, a French NGO that was working in the Muslim village of Muttur, south of Trincomalee. Bernard Kouchner, the now current foreign minister for France, was on IIGEP at that time. He really wanted to press that, so we pressed it. We found that this took 6 months of our 14 months, and still it was not a case that came anywhere near being solved, even though it was quite self-evident that it had been perpetrated by the forces of the state.

After a while it became quite clear that the directives to the commission of inquiry were coming from the Attorney General's office, or even higher. They became quite insulting to P. N. Bhagwati, who was the former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India and who was the chair of IIGEP. He basically said that if this didn't improve, we should resign, so we did. We resigned after 14 months.

● (1600)

I don't say it's a failure, just like I don't think the Forum of Federations initiative was a failure. I think we added something to it.

Hon. Bob Rae: I like to think that it wasn't.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Matthews.

Mr. Patry, very quickly.

Mr. Bernard Patry (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): *Merci beaucoup.*. Thank you very much. Yes, very quickly; short questions.

The first one is this. It seems that the LTTE will be defeated; it's just a question of time. Do you feel that there's any chance of special autonomy for the Tamil community after the defeat of the LTTE? Is there any chance for autonomy, not sovereignty, or is it finished for all time?

My second question is for Mr. Matthews. You mentioned the complex historical, territorial, and socio-economic forces. You talked about the revival of Buddhism and nationalism. Do you feel that, between the Buddhists and the Hindus, there are any leaders on either side who could help solve that problem? It seems they're quite apart.

Thank you.

Prof. David R. Cameron: I think, realistically, there's no chance of serious decentralization. I guess the test case will be what happens with respect to the 13th amendment, which is a constitutional amendment creating provincial councils that has never been fully implemented. It's been on the books for a very long time. There's some talk and action that's being taken in a very limited degree.

The resistance to seriously contemplating the dispersion of the power of the state on the part of the Sinhalese majority—and the government tends to be composed of heavy representation from them—is so fierce that I think the closest Sri Lanka came to that was when it actually had, for a brief period of time, a significantly powerful interlocutor on the other side of the table, the LTTE, during the peace talks. Now you have nobody on the other side of the table. In fact, once they're defeated, there is no table. In that context, the notion that there will be significant decentralization of the power of the state is not in the cards.

Mr. Bernard Patry: And about religion?

Prof. Bruce Matthews: Buddhism is involved on the Sinhala side as part of the nationalist identity. Hinduism is not involved on the LTTE side. In fact, many of the LTTE, if they embrace any religion at all, are Roman Catholics. If it is described as a kind of religious war, if you want to put it that way, it would have to be a very loose description, and it could only pertain to the hard right-wing Sinhala nationalists who wish to bring that dimension into it. To some degree, the Jathika Hela Urumaya and other Desha Premi groups, nationalist groups, have done this over a period of 40 or 50 years.

I think it's more like Northern Ireland, where Catholicism and Protestantism were sucked into, basically, a political drama: on the coattails of a political situation, religion came to have a role to play in it, tragically. We certainly all know that the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Pope—nobody would ever have agreed to a religious war in Ireland, but it was done anyway. That's the way I would look at it, sir.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Matthews.

We'll move to Monsieur Dorion.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Dorion, for seven minutes.

Mr. Jean Dorion (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, BQ): Thank you.

My question is for Mr. Cameron and Mr. Matthews. The impression that people often has is that Tamils who have fled Sri Lanka and who now live abroad overwhelmingly support the Tigers. Is that also your impression?

[*English*]

Prof. David R. Cameron: I think the LTTE has been very powerful in organizing, providing leadership, and indeed putting political pressure on the Tamil diaspora around the world, and certainly in Canada, especially in Toronto.

I think the difficulty is that there has been no other political force around which Tamils could rally to try to achieve reforms or justice for the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. That's partly due to the LTTE murdering their opponents and competitors. It was historically a very brutal movement. They have been very effective internationally in generating support, in pressuring people to provide support where they might not have done it spontaneously, in raising money for their movement.

You saw in the rally in Toronto the number of Tiger flags. There's a lot of sentiment in the rest of the world to that effect. One of the reasons for that is there has been no other alternative political formation around which Tamils seeking reforms could rally.

● (1605)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Dorion: Mr. Matthews.

Dr. Bruce Matthews: I hope you don't mind if I answer you in English.

[*English*]

In this instance, the LTTE, over a period of 25 years now, has systematically eradicated, eliminated, destroyed, or neutralized—whatever—any Tamil opposition. The long list of Sinhala and Tamil moderates who've been assassinated by the LTTE is very sad testimony to the rigour of the LTTE plan for the Tamil destiny. There is absolutely no wiggle room for anyone else.

That is certainly so in Canada. With all due respect to the Tamil community here, I don't know of any real way in which, even amongst themselves, they can discuss this issue of other possible political alternatives. There's only the one that is available to them, at least in the public domain. That's a great sadness, in my opinion.

The Chair: Mr. Cameron.

Prof. David R. Cameron: If I could just make one further comment, I think the Tamils, not just in Sri Lanka but around the world, are on the cusp of a major challenge, because the LTTE, on all the evidence, will not be there for them or against them.

In the future, it won't be the significant factor that it has been, so there's a big, big question. In that context, how do people who care about their country and about the fate of Tamils in Sri Lanka organize, and what kind of force can be mounted to support those aspirations and interests? That's an enormous question that I think people are just going to have to face in the next several years.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Dorion: Mr. Cameron, you mentioned one Tiger leader, a Mr. Karuna Amman, who switched allegiances and is now a minister in the Sinhalese government. Do you think that his actions reflect his personal ambition or is this an indication that he truly embraces a different vision of the Tamils' future in Sri Lanka?

[*English*]

Prof. David R. Cameron: My impression is that there are a couple of factors. One, I think, is that there were tensions within the LTTE movement that people from the outside could not readily observe, tensions between the Tamils of Jaffna and the Tamils of the east. He was the commander of the forces of the east. I have no idea of what the details were, but I think the frustration developed to such an extent that he decided he would break with the LTTE. When he went, he took a lot of people with him.

Also, my understanding is that he was traditionally very much on the moderate wing of the LTTE, so I think there may have been some frustration on that score.

No doubt, since he has now entered the government and when the Karuna forces left they started working implicitly with the military, there is clearly personal ambition as well.

I would think that there are at least those three factors.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Dorion: It would appear that the Tigers especially loath Muslims and yet, Muslims are themselves Tamils. What is behind this loathing?

[*English*]

Prof. David R. Cameron: I might ask Dr. Matthews to respond to that, because I think he may have studied that a little more closely than I have.

Prof. Bruce Matthews: The Muslim community, which is at least one million strong, or maybe more, is all over the island, except in the north, where they were expelled by the LTTE in the early 1990s. They are very strong in the eastern province. They would make up about one-third of the population of the eastern province. In certain parts of the eastern province, like Ampara, they are so self-evidently the majority that they would actually like to have some autonomy themselves, not as a secessionist state but certainly as an identifiable province or constituency.

The Muslim community also very wisely entered into the mainline Sri Lankan political parties after independence. For 30 or 40 years they've gained a much more credible political position in Sri Lanka because they cooperated with the UNP and the SLFP, the two major parties. It's only in the last 15 or 20 years that they have started to split off and form their own political parties, like the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress. Even then, they tend to cooperate with the state. I would have to say that they are not in favour of the LTTE and would be delighted to see the end of them.

● (1610)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Dorion: May I continue?

[*English*]

The Chair: No, you're out of time. Thank you.

Mr. Obhrai.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, gentlemen, for coming. Of course, we have read a lot about your past work there.

First of all, Mr. Matthews, you mentioned engaging the local LTTE groups in Canada at this time. The problem with that is the LTTE in Canada is listed as a terrorist organization, and any involvement over there could have political repercussions within the country itself. However, the last time I did tell the Tamil community, as you've said, to find means and ways to be outside.

There's no question, in all the evidence we have heard here, that the LTTE is in its last stages. There's a vacuum in the Tamil community. The Sri Lankan government has taken hard steps. That is very clear from every witness who has come here. And of course, as you have alluded to, if the LTTE is defeated, this war will carry on. It's not going to die unless there's reconciliation.

The war is eventually boiling down to reconciliation. At this given time, nothing seems to be going in that direction...the vacuum, the government, the Sinhalese national movement. Despite the fact that Canada cannot do anything substantial, I think it ultimately leaves room for the international community to fill that vacuum, for the time being, until with the new leadership in the Tamil community reconciliation comes, moderate figures come out of the state. I'm sure, as in any other country in the world, moderate figures eventually will come out of this whole mayhem that is taking place right now.

The involvement of the regional parties, the regional players—India, Pakistan, and all these guys, and ourselves—in all these things here would be the key element at this stage to fill that. So my question to you is, do you agree that this would be the most appropriate approach to take now, and if so, what is your thinking on how to approach this idea?

Prof. Bruce Matthews: From the point of view of the Government of Canada?

● (1615)

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Yes.

Prof. Bruce Matthews: It is to indicate that we are very interested and earnest in our urging of the Sri Lankan government to attend to the humanitarian crisis in the northern province and to keep pressing for this humanitarian pause that I mentioned to you a few minutes ago, rather than use the word “ceasefire”, which of course suggests that the LTTE may be able to regroup if there's just a ceasefire. Nobody wants to see them regroup, except of course for the hard-line LTTE. Surely we have a responsibility to say publicly and internationally that Canada very much supports any humanitarian initiative in the matter of getting innocent civilians out of the combat zone.

After that, if there's any chance that Canada, through its aid programs, through its international clout, can persuade Sri Lanka to take more seriously bringing to birth a viable, honourable government in the northern province, which allows for Ceylon Tamil identity and legacy to be continued and given some dignity.... Right now I rather doubt that's going to happen. I wonder if there even are Tamil leaders who can come forward and perform those functions.

But that being said, I still think we need to indicate that this is what we would like to see and to remind the Sri Lankan government that we have possibly as many as 300,000 Tamils living in Canada and this is an important issue for us, too, because we want to make sure they have a place in Canadian society and that they are not totally aggrieved over what has come to pass in their homeland. That may be a roundabout way of saying that I still think the Canadian government should be able to voice a strong humanitarian position and also press for a credible autonomy for the northern, and for that matter, the eastern province as things settle down.

The eastern province now is technically in line with the government, but it's a cold peace. I was in the eastern province just a few months ago, and when I say a “cold peace”, the police blocks are everywhere. People are still very fearful of talking, of speaking. Technically speaking, it's not under the control of the LTTE, of course, but still, you wouldn't want to live there—not yet.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Matthews.

Mr. Goldring, did you want to...?

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

You mentioned in your speaking notes, Dr. Matthews, the lack of mature democratization. On the other hand, there's discussion of autonomy and self-determination. If we turn the clock back to the British rule before independence, obviously the British had to face this aspect of possible self-determination and autonomy at that time too, and yet they failed to approach it, for whatever reasons. Now we bring it forward to today, and I would think it would be equally as problematic to try to approach, because self-determination and autonomy is in itself divisive and might be of concern to the government.

My question is whether this would be a role that perhaps the British Commonwealth could approach and have some input into, because they obviously have past experience with it and they may be able to lend some kind of thought on what could and could not be accomplished by taking that direction. It's certainly not the first country in the world that has found it very, very difficult to deal with self-determination for smaller terrorist groups and organizations, and there may be a real resistance to doing it.

Given that the situation has been exasperated by a lot of terrorism and a minority population, could the Commonwealth play a role in trying to help determine feasibility or no feasibility, as the case may be, for the government?

The Chair: Very quickly, Mr. Matthews.

Prof. Bruce Matthews: Well, very quickly I would say no, because the Sri Lankan government right now would not be interested in hearing from the Commonwealth. They don't want to hear from anybody.

Secondly, you did raise a very interesting point when you used the word “terrorism”, and I think that's been part of the problem right from the beginning. The Sri Lankan government has only defined the crisis in Sri Lanka as a terrorist one. Of course, if you're a Tamil, it's a liberation one; it's not a terrorist one. That has been problematic for me too, as I look at this from the perspective of what outsiders can do. Because the LTTE has been so branded by the terrorist label, there doesn't seem to be any room to understand that they actually come from a wellspring of liberation seekers.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Matthews.

Mr. Dewar, please.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to our guests for their presentations today.

I find it disheartening yet again, and you're not the only bearers of bad analysis and reporting, so don't take it personally—

A voice: It's good analysis.

Mr. Paul Dewar: It's good analysis. It's just that we as a committee are trying to navigate through the waters of the present-day situation on the ground. We've heard from the international community, the Red Cross, in its reporting, which was absolutely horrific. I note that last night, finally, on a national network, we saw a report. There was some on CBC—I don't know if you saw that—but we haven't seen much reporting. We have heard from journalists about the horrific situation on the ground, for them to actually report on the situation. And of course what's been happening is that some of them have been losing their lives for reporting. So what to make of it. You have provided us with some suggestions.

Maybe, Mr. Cameron, I'll start with you. I am someone who believes strongly in the notion of a federal system being the model for other countries around the world, but it's been described here as the "f" word that shall not be spoken—in terms of the government, certainly.

If we're looking at a situation where we've got a government that's just saying they're going to wipe the opposition out—that's their goal—can Canada only do something when that is over? Is that it? Certainly the report on the news last night was very clear that they're buoyed by their military progress. So we can't do much else, just wait it out until that military exercise.... I hate to use those words because they kind of sound aesthetic, but is that basically it?

● (1620)

Prof. David R. Cameron: I think so, yes. There's a policy question, because I take the implication of what you're asking as whether there is something that could be done to prop up or sustain or keep the LTTE as a going concern.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Right.

Prof. David R. Cameron: Well, the basis on which you would want to do that, frankly, is a policy issue, given the character of the organization and its conduct. Certainly, when I was involved in the peace discussions, as I said in my talk, there was no palpable or serious sign of a willingness on their part to engage in pluralistic democratic politics, to respect the opinions of others, or to talk the issues through. The barrel of the gun to them was the resolution of the pressures they were under.

Unless there were some amazing transformation in the character of the LTTE, there's a real question whether that would be desirable. But even if it were, I just can't believe that Canada or anybody has the capacity or an iota of influence to say anything to the Government of Sri Lanka at this moment, after 25 years of civil war and when it finally has the LTTE cornered, to get it to back off.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Mr. Matthews, we have heard from other witnesses about possible actions that can be taken. You have noted, and others have, that countries in Europe, particularly Norway, have been involved and have some experience. And the Commonwealth was mentioned by Mr. Goldring.

I put forward a question to another witness last week about the idea of forming a contact group with parties who are honestly interested—obviously, Canada being one—in starting to forge a consensus as to what can be done collectively, and to send a message directly to the government about our concerns, but also as a follow-up, hopefully, when the smoke clears, to what can be done, because it's not going to be the end of opposition to the government.

I just wonder what your thoughts are about the formulation of a contact group.

Prof. Bruce Matthews: Well, there would be no harm in that. I don't know how practical it is.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Well, that's what I hear, yes.

Prof. Bruce Matthews: Yes, but certainly there'd be no harm in it.

There have been so many recent initiatives. I read the other day that there were 10 former American ambassadors who have written to Mahinda Rajapaksa and said to him, do you realize that your country is becoming an authoritarian, almost fascist, state? I don't know if they used those exact words, but it was a quiet warning from those former American ambassadors that he was heading down the wrong path.

So I'm sure the Government of Sri Lanka has heard a lot of this. The potential group you are just describing would probably be seen by the Government of Sri Lanka as another attempt to interfere with its affairs. But still, it's better than nothing. It's better than nothing for us to at least be able to say, this is what we think is an honest and credible position for Sri Lanka to have going forward.

● (1625)

Mr. Paul Dewar: I'm going to ask a question that I've asked of others. Would it be of benefit to have one of our ministers go directly to Sri Lanka and state unequivocally, on the ground there, our position to the government?

Prof. Bruce Matthews: Frankly, sir, I doubt it. I don't think that would wear well with them, under the present circumstances, where there's a fair amount of chauvinism in the air and victory is perceived to be quite near. It would look like interference and I don't think it would gain Canada any honourable prestige in this matter.

I don't know what you think, though, David.

Prof. David R. Cameron: I think Canada does need to be part of a continuing drumbeat of concern and an insistence on the standards that any country should be held to. That should be expressed and communicated by Canada, along with the rest of the world, to Sri Lanka. I don't think it's going to have much impact in the short term.

One of the concerns I would have is that, frankly, Sri Lanka is a very small country, a little island in the Indian Ocean. It's not the cockpit of conflict that the Middle East is, for example, so it's easy for it to recede from consciousness. So one of the tricks I think would be for this issue of Sri Lanka and the just treatment of the minorities there to remain in the consciousness of the international community.

That's going to be a challenge, but I think it's very important that those words be spoken and that pressure be imposed on them, even if, in the short run, it doesn't have a great deal of impact.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Cameron.

I'll go to Ms. Brown for a very quick question.

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Dr. Matthews, I think my question is probably more directed to you, but I'm sure both of you would have some thoughts on it.

Dr. Matthews, you spoke about the polarization of the Tamil and the Sinhalese communities, and then you spoke about the polarization even within their own groups. Both of you have spoken about the several peace initiatives that have been attempted by the international community, which both of you have outlined in your remarks.

I wonder if you can speak to this issue of the Norwegian agreement that was the longest standing peace initiative or peace process that was put in place. Is there any one nugget we can take from that and start building on?

Dr. Matthews, perhaps as part of this—I won't make it a second question—I note that you talked about confidence-building. We often have to take confidence one piece at a time, and this is a long-term process.

So all wrapped up in that, my question is, first, about the Norwegian peace and, second, about confidence-building.

Prof. Bruce Matthews: Chandra Kumaratunga, who was then the president, invited Norway to come in to Sri Lanka to do this. You won't find the present president at all interested in having Norway or any other international group perform the same function.

Ms. Lois Brown: But is there any one piece of that peace initiative that we can build on?

Prof. Bruce Matthews: Why don't you take a crack at that, David? I really don't see, right off the top of my head, that there is.

Prof. David R. Cameron: I think there's a lesson for Canada in the Norway experience, but it's not a nugget in the peace process itself. The thing that struck and very much impressed me was Norway's commitment of resources of very senior political and administrative talent, and their "stick-to-itiveness". They just kept on keeping on, day after day, week after week, year after year, investing a lot of time, energy, and intelligence in trying to support this process and see it through to a conclusion. I salute Norway for that, and I think the lesson for Canada is that there may be—not necessarily in Sri Lanka, but if you start thinking strategically about the world—niche moments and opportunities like this one in which a very major commitment from a relatively small country, and Norway is far smaller than we are, can make a very significant difference. A country of that sort can play a role that the big powers cannot play. I look at this as something that we in our aid and development policy and planning should think about quite carefully.

● (1630)

The Chair: Thank you very much to both of you.

Yes.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: The news is just coming that the Sri Lankan government is considering a humanitarian pause to the fight.

The Chair: A humanitarian pause? Maybe they're listening to our committee. I didn't know we were broadcasting live over there.

We appreciate that update, Mr. Obhrai.

Mr. Matthews, is this in response to that?

Prof. Bruce Matthews: It's not in response to that, but in response to the question about caste and the internal struggles of these two groups.

This is an extremely important issue that very few people outside Sri Lanka know anything about. I'm not going to enter into it now in any detail, except to say that caste is a phenomenon of the Indian subcontinent that spread over into Sri Lanka. It is a topic, like your sex life, that you do not discuss in public; it's a very private thing. But in the context both of the Sinhalese population and of the LTTE, there have been internal caste wars, and they are definitely part of the complex background of this, which we often ignore. That just shows you how culturally entrenched this is, that even economic issues become exposed to a cultural interpretation, which makes them all the more volatile. It's almost as if nothing can escape the black hole of bringing any apparatus or part of what it is to be a Sri Lankan today into this ethnic maw. But certainly the caste thing is a complicated part of it, and I wanted to mention that it's something we don't know much about.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We will suspend for about thirty seconds, allowing our guests to take their exit and our next guests to take their seats, please.

We're continuing our committee hearings on the situation in Sri Lanka, in the second hour. We just heard the breaking news that the Sri Lankan government is considering a pause for humanitarian relief in the northern part of Sri Lanka to allow some humanitarian effort there.

In this hour, we will be hearing from the Sri Lanka United National Association of Canada.

I invite you to introduce yourselves, and then you can make a short opening statement. Then we'll go into the first rounds of questioning. Each party has seven minutes, and we try to keep the first round to about ten minutes each.

So if you wouldn't mind, Mr. Weerasinghe or Mr. Gunasekera, introduce yourselves and make your comments. Thank you.

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera (President, Sri Lanka United National Association of Canada): My name is Mahinda Gunasekera. I'm the current president of the Sri Lanka United National Association.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I would like to thank you for giving us this opportunity.

As you know, Sri Lanka is a small island. It has a total land mass of roughly 25,000 square miles. It has a multi-ethnic, multi-religious population counting nearly 20 million, of whom about 78.4% are today from the Sinhala community. The Sri Lankan Tamil community has been reduced, from the prior number of 12.6% to just under 8%, due to large-scale migration from the country. The Indian Tamils, who were brought in by the British for work on the plantations, are roughly 5.4%. The Moors, who are Muslims, are about the same population as the Sri Lankan Tamils, also roughly 7.8% to 7.9%. There is a very small percentage of Malays and Burghers, the descendants of the Dutch.

I've come to the main grievances that we've heard from the Tamil community. The first issue is language.

Sinhala was made the official language, replacing the alien language of English, in 1956. With Sinhala spoken by 78% of the population as the official language, allowing the reasonable use of Tamil, including the right to free education in Tamil from kindergarten to university, was still considered discrimination against the Tamil population. English, introduced by the colonial administration, was spoken by less than 6% of the population, with the vast majority not having access to English education even after 133 years of British rule.

The linguistic rights of the Tamils were gradually enhanced. Their language was later elevated as a national language by the Second Republican Constitution of 1978. It was subsequently further upgraded to an official language following the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987 and placed on a par with Sinhala.

The grievance relating to linguistic rights was sorted out by 1978, within the short space of 22 years, and could therefore not become a cause for the armed insurrection that was launched in the 1980s.

The other question that was raised was the citizenship of the Indian Tamils, the indentured labourers brought in by the British. They had been brought over by the British colonial power as indentured labourers for work on the newly established tea, coffee, and cocoa plantations set up on land confiscated from Sinhala peasants and landowners without a penny in compensation being paid to the displaced Sinhala people.

These Indian Tamils, who did not consider Sri Lanka their homeland, were migrant workers who returned to their native Tamil Nadu in southern India after short periods of employment, and hence did not qualify for citizenship in newly independent Ceylon, now Sir Lanka. They lacked the stipulated residential qualifications for citizenship, which was seven years. Indian Tamils who failed to qualify for citizenship and remained stateless had their citizenship amicably settled between Sri Lanka and India under the Sirima-Shastri Pact of 1963.

The other issue was the alleged discrimination against Tamil students. The claim that Tamil students were discriminated against by the introduction of standardization of marks in the 1970s is yet another canard.

The scheme of standardization was introduced as an affirmative action program to offset some of the disadvantages faced by students from rural schools, which lacked quality teachers, libraries, laboratories, etc., as compared with better-facilitated and long-established city schools. This scheme required students from the city schools to score higher averages to qualify for admission to the universities. It equally affected students in the city schools located in the predominantly Tamil Jaffna peninsula and other southern cities such as Colombo, Galle, and Kandy.

Today, following the destruction of the education system in the Jaffna region owing to separatist violence, Jaffna students are benefiting from this very standardization scheme. The district is now considered a deprived region, where lower marks will qualify for admission to the university.

● (1635)

Yet another issue was the so-called settlement of Sinhalese on newly developed state lands. The Tamils have no claim to an exclusive homeland within the territory of Sri Lanka. Their national homeland is in Tamil Nadu in south India, where 65 million Tamils live. After independence, new development projects were undertaken to reclaim the land overrun by jungles. One such project was the Gal Oya project, which was initiated with U.S. technical assistance. Landless peasantry and unemployed people who had an agricultural background but were living in densely populated areas were settled into food production on very small allotments of land on 99-year leases. No Tamils were willing to take these subsistence-sized plots in mosquito-infested areas where malaria was widespread at the time, as they enjoyed more lucrative employment in both the government and private sectors.

The Tamil separatist movement began, not in 1976 after the passing of the resolution, but as far back as 1918, when the Justice Party of Tamil Nadu in south India campaigned to establish a separate country, called Dravidistan, in India.

Prior to the grant of independence in 1948, the British established a special commission in 1945, headed by Lord Soulbury, to hear the claims of the constituent groups on the island. The Tamils did not speak of their claims, if any, to a traditional homeland encompassing the north and east, which they recently invented following their moves to establish the separate monoethnic Tamil state called Eelam. They only sought balanced representation in the Parliament of the newly independent Sri Lanka, where the Tamil-speaking minorities would be guaranteed 50% of the seats, while the 78% Sinhalese would have to contest in order to fill the remaining 50% of the places. Lord Soulbury rejected this 50-50 demand as an insidious move to make a minority a majority, and instead introduced universal suffrage with voting rights for all persons over 21 years.

In the present situation, the total number of internally displaced civilians forced to move with the retreating Tiger forces is estimated at between 250,000 and 400,000 by various INGO and UN agencies. Now it appears to be not more than 120,000, of whom nearly 55,000 have already moved out of the diminishing sliver of land held by the LTTE to safety and welfare facilities in government-controlled areas, despite armed attacks on escaping civilians by the Tamil Tigers. Apparently the international non-governmental groups have been exaggerating the number of IDPs to receive enhanced funding for the operations and retain their high-paying jobs with various perks in this tropical isle. In fact, certain INGOs and a UN agency were not agreeable to releasing the displaced civilians in Muttur township, as they claimed they had negotiated funding for a period of three years, whereas the government had de-mined and restored the place, enabling the people to move back to their homes in 40 days.

After the rapid advance made by Sri Lanka's military to regain the use of territory illegally held by the Tamil Tigers, it has become clear that neither the LTTE nor any other non-governmental groups had made any worthwhile contribution to uplift the living conditions of the civilian population in the Vanni during the past 20 years. However, it has come to light that these INGOs, either willingly or unwillingly, provided a great deal of assistance to the Tamil Tiger military machine in acquiring highly sophisticated military hardware; ultra-modern communications equipment; technical know-how to develop various weapons, including submarines; chemical weapons; airstrips to land heavy cargo planes; and a lot more.

● (1640)

These INGO groups have hidden agendas. Some of them are known to surreptitiously engage in converting poverty-affected Sinhala and Tamil civilians to Christianity by providing allurements or bribes to qualify for assistance, and even getting these unethically converted people to openly smash images of their Hindu gods or Buddhist statues, giving rise to unnecessary friction within those rural communities.

One such project was code-named the Mustard Seed Project by World Vision, which too claims to be doing community development work in Sri Lanka.

Most of these INGO and NGO groups that are funded from overseas, including Canada, have a very hostile and confrontational approach to the Government of Sri Lanka, while they are known to maintain friendly ties to the LTTE.

As a result of this behaviour of the non-government groups that disburse Canada's foreign aid in the country, the close ties the people of Sri Lanka had with Canada are tending to go sour.

● (1645)

The Chair: Can I interrupt and ask how much more you have? We're well over 10 minutes.

I've also looked at the other presentation and it looks like it's going to be well over 10 minutes.

Can we try to keep it to 10 minutes?

Perhaps you could close off as quickly as you can.

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera: Yes, okay.

The Chair: We will keep the statement and we'll enter the whole statement into the—

Hon. Bob Rae: It will be in the text of the meeting.

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera: The people of Sri Lanka have suffered the pain of three decades of terrorist violence, not knowing if their lives would be snatched by a Tamil Tiger, a suicide bomber, a bomb planted in a bus, train, or shopping centre, or a remote-control claymore bomb, as they went about their day-to-day living.

Today the peace-loving citizens of all the constituent communities see a new era emerging as the security forces regain their land and eliminate the Tamil Tiger killers.

It has been noted that Canada has always advocated a federal model to resolve ethnic differences, thereby perpetuating the ethnic divide. That will lead in the future to more of what has been experienced, as it would encourage the separatist forces to use their semi-autonomous devolved unit as a springboard to separation, for which an armed struggle has been waged for the past 30 years, including suicide terrorism.

A workable alternative, which is currently being discussed by expatriate Sri Lankans and patriots in Sri Lanka, is to afford the minorities a new deal to share power at the centre, and at the same time scale back the proposed devolution units made up of the present districts, which could easily be serviced through the existing district secretariats without unduly fattening the bureaucracy. The minorities that complain of majority community domination at the centre, which wields the greatest amount of power, could now be drawn into parliamentary select committees and special experts committees for each and every ministry, where they will play a role in the day-to-day governance by having a say in the development of policy, planning, implementation, and monitoring stages with respect to every single program undertaken by government.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll move to Mr. Weerasinghe.

Mr. Asoka Weerasinghe (Member, Sri Lanka United National Association of Canada): Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, good afternoon.

I'm grateful to you for giving me the opportunity to express my concerns on recent events in Sri Lanka. I intend to clarify some of the misconceptions about this ethnic crisis, this terrible war between a legitimately elected, democratic government, a member of the Commonwealth, and a non-elected group, the Tamil terrorists, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, also known as the Tamil Tigers.

Since 1983 the Tamil Tigers have been creating mayhem for Sri Lanka. For the past three decades this tiny island has been in crisis, hemorrhaging its people, its resources, and its soul. Only now, when the Tamil Tigers are about to be eliminated, only now after 26 years are some countries, including Canada, taking an interest in this terrorist war.

Such interest prompted Canada to have an emergency debate on Sri Lanka in Parliament on February 4. Watching the debate on CPAC, I found it an amazing piece of theatre. It was mostly Sri Lanka government bashing and not the bashing of the Tamil Tigers, who are indeed a killer cult. There were moments of hoax theatre when five Liberal members of Parliament accused the Sri Lankan government of genocide. No doubt those members have found out since then that the charge was unfair, unwholesome, and incorrect.

The Tamil Tigers, the LTTE, have been banned as a terrorist organization in 32 countries, including Canada. They have assassinated two heads of state—Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of India, and President Ranasinghe Premadasa of Sri Lanka—and 32 other politicians in Sri Lanka, including three mayors of Jaffna and the country's foreign minister, all Tamils. Of the 32 assassinated politicians, 18 were moderate Tamils.

The LTTE are the terrorists who perfected the body pack for the human bomb and exploded the 379th human bomb in Mullaitivu, a few metres from an army front line on March 17. On January 11, 2008, the FBI described the LTTE as the most dangerous and deadly extremist outfit in the world. The FBI has credited them with perfecting the use of suicide bombers, inventing suicide belts, and pioneering the use of women in suicide attacks. The FBI says that this rebel group's ruthless tactics have inspired terrorist networks worldwide, including al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The Tamil Tiger terrorist group, now proscribed in Canada and for over a quarter century an existential threat to the integrity of Sri Lanka's democracy, is now on the ropes. Eighteen months back they controlled an area of Sri Lanka that exceeded 15,000 square kilometres. They have now been pushed back by Sri Lankan armed forces to a sliver of land about 25 square kilometres, an area less than what we can see from Parliament Hill here in Ottawa.

A long intransigent, uncompromising group, the Tamil Tigers are now groveling and begging for a ceasefire. The long-suffering people of Sri Lanka have seen this all before. Six times the Government of Sri Lanka, yearning for peace, agreed to ceasefires. Six times the Tigers reneged. No government wants to go back to the ruinous business of war. But during each of those six ceasefires, the Tamil Tigers rearmed themselves and recruited sufficient cadres to continue, including, I must add, children under the age of 14—in fact, 6,300 of them, according to UNICEF.

There was no stopping these ruthless aggressors. The years 1985, 1987, 1989, 1995, 2000, and 2002 all saw ceasefires. The Tamil Tigers—and I emphasize it was the Tamil Tigers—always resumed war.

The last ceasefire, negotiated by Norway, between February 2002 and January 2008, is a classic case in point. It lasted longer than the others. According to the Scandinavian ceasefire monitors, by July 14, 2006, the Tamil Tigers had violated the ceasefire 7,308 times. During the same period, the Sri Lankan armed forces had violated the ceasefire just under 200 times. So it's no wonder the Tamil Tigers agreed to that sweetheart deal worked out in Oslo.

During the last ceasefire, the Tamil Tigers brought in 11 shiploads of arms. The 12th shipload got away when the Norwegian head of the Scandinavian ceasefire monitors, General Trygve Tellefsen, tipped the captain of the ship that the Sri Lankan navy was after them. This ceasefire saw the Tamil Tigers bring in four Czech Zlin 143 propeller aircraft, which were turned into night bombers. They graduated to become the first international terrorist outfit to have an air wing.

It was during this ceasefire that the Tamil Tigers built seven airstrips, two of which were long and wide enough to land large cargo transport planes.

● (1650)

The internationally respected journal on military intelligence, *Jane's Intelligence Review*, says these transport planes were very likely to have flown in arms. It was during this ceasefire in 2002 that the Norwegians helped the LTTE to build strong high-tech communication systems by bringing in six tons of electronic equipment as diplomatic cargo, including V satellite equipment for satellite communications. It was during this ceasefire that the Tamil Tigers started manufacturing submarines and suicide craft. Ladies and gentlemen, it was during this ceasefire that the Tamil Tigers developed their vast Tamil Tiger criminal enterprise—credit card fraud, shakedowns, heroin, human smuggling—raking in hundreds of millions of dollars, much of it from Canada.

Everything the Tamil Tigers did during that ceasefire was to further a military victory over Sri Lanka. Certainly, Sri Lanka also built up its armed forces. Would Canada not do so if it were under such constant threat? Sure enough, as soon as the Tamil Tigers felt they had the capability of defeating Sri Lanka's army, their leader, Prabhakaran, restarted the war. It was interesting to see Tamil Tiger attitudes change over the course of the ceasefire. At first they feigned interest in a negotiated settlement. During the last session in Geneva, members of the delegation, given visas by the Swiss and Norwegians, spent all their time raising funds amongst the Tamil diaspora. They did not even bother turning up at the negotiating table, which embarrassed the Norwegians who had facilitated that meeting.

I'm going to skip some of my presentation because the time is running out.

Surrounded closely on all sides by 50,000 soldiers and sailors, what is this megalomaniac Prabhakaran up to? In the narrow strip of land he controls, there are about 500 hard-core cadres, maybe a thousand children and old persons he has forcibly conscripted into carrying armaments, and approximately 50,000 Tamil civilians who have been taken hostage. There is clear evidence that the Tamil Tigers have built bunkers and sited their remaining long guns right in the middle of the hapless human shields. The Sri Lankan government has declared a large swath of seaside land a safe zone and is doing its best to protect this civilian population. Indeed, destroying the Tamil Tigers could happen in a single day because the core is no further from army positions than we are from Aylmer, Quebec.

I bristle, and Sri Lankans bristle, when foreigners declare their sympathies for these poor Sri Lankan hostages. Make no mistake—Sri Lankans care about them more than you do, more than anyone does. It is, therefore, with astonishment that I observe Sri Lankan Tamil Canadian demonstrators saying absolutely nothing about the Tamil Tigers releasing their human shields. The constant theme is "ceasefire", you may have noticed. And, of course, one of our Liberal MPs spoke at such a demonstration on March 5, saying "I'd like to let you know I'm helping you guys. I'm behind you because you are fighting a right cause." He of course conveniently forgot that it was some of his clan extremists who brought down Air India Flight 182, killing 312 Indo-Canadians on June 23, 1985, the worst terrorist attack in Canadian history.

Of course, as I explained to you in the beginning, the entire thrust of the recent Tamil Tiger propaganda campaign has been to save the leadership; save these nasties to fight another day; to blow up ten thousand more civilians; to assassinate moderate Tamil leaders; to kill democratically elected leaders; and to further destroy my beautiful motherland. No, it will not happen. And if I have my way, I will never let it happen.

You might ask whether I believe that peace is possible in Sri Lanka. My answer is an emphatic yes. The eastern province is a case in point, which had democratic elections for its provincial council seven months after the Tamil Tigers were wiped out. Its people elected a former Tamil Tiger child soldier, Piliyan, who gave up terrorism in 2004, as their chief minister. The development of the eastern province is going full speed ahead, and the people are content. This certainly will happen in the northern province too, once the Tamil Tiger curse is eliminated.

So the answer is, I repeat, yes, peace is possible in Sri Lanka.

Mr. Chairman, I've cut my statement as much as I can. Ladies and gentlemen, permit me to thank you once again for giving me the opportunity to address you all.

● (1655)

The Chair: Wow. Thank you. We appreciate your comments. Again, we will enter the complete statement into the record.

We'll move into the first round here, and we'll go to Mr. Patry or Mr. Rae.

Mr. Patry, go ahead.

Mr. Bernard Patry: Thank you.

Merci beaucoup. Thank you very much, Asoka and Mahinda.

I just have three very short questions.

Why doesn't the Government of Sri Lanka lift the embargo on food, medications, and essential articles?

Why aren't any NGOs allowed in the region?

Why are no independent media allowed to do their work in the region?

Those are my three questions. They're very simple questions.

Thank you.

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera: There is no embargo. The food is being shipped. Some of the food shipments have been attacked by the LTTE. Even a cargo ship that came to drop off food for the displaced civilians was attacked by artillery, and the ship had to be taken back to deep water. In spite of all these difficulties, food is being delivered.

What was the second question, sir?

Mr. Bernard Patry: It was about the NGOs and the work of the NGOs and the media.

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera: The NGOs may have complained earlier, but today I find that NGOs are worried that some of their staff who were not allowed to come over have been conscripted by the LTTE, and even their families are not being allowed free movement. So I suppose the decision of the government that it was difficult to guarantee their security was right. Even the NGO staff are being held back and conscripted to fight for them.

Mr. Bernard Patry: On the media, why is no independent media allowed to work?

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera: I suppose it would have been madness for any media person to have gone into that conflict zone. However, the media subsequently have been taken to areas that were safe for them to visit, even media from Canada, such as a *National Post* reporter and Rick Westhead of the *Toronto Star*. They and several other media people from other countries have visited the conflict zone.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Patry: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move to Mr. Crête.

Can you hear now, Mr. Weerasinghe?

Yes? Okay.

● (1700)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): The situation in Sri Lanka is very complex and the conflict is probably quite hard to defuse. However, do you see any other solution to this problem, other than the elimination of one of the two parties?

[*English*]

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera: Pardon me. I'm sorry, but I didn't have English interpretation.

The Chair: The question is this: is there any way to see closure to the situation in Sri Lanka without the annihilation of any one of the parties?

Mr. Asoka Weerasinghe: I cannot see coming to any conclusion without getting rid of the LTTE, but there are moderate Tamils, and actually politicians, who are in right now in.... The Jaffna minister is a Tamil. Douglas Devananda was a former terrorist. He's in the cabinet. There are other moderate Tamils who are leaders of some of the parties, such as PLOTE and TELO, and there's Anandasangari of TULF. They are all waiting to take up the job, actually, and come to some conclusions with the Government of Sri Lanka.

So there are moderate Tamils—as long as they have not been wiped out or snuffed out, too, like the other moderate Tamils—who would work for peace.

Mr. Paul Crête: If the Tamils reject the utilization of violence, are you able, in spirit, to accept that they may have the political right to have a different country, to have a different way of doing things, and to separate the two parts of the country? Are you able to accept that if they accept not to utilize violence?

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera: I don't think the people of Sri Lanka would be agreeable to breaking up their country. That won't be negotiable. Certainly they will be brought in, and they have a place even today. A majority of the Tamil people live among the Sinhalese and the Muslims. Only a very small minority was being kept by the Tiger forces, the Tamil Tigers. A lot of people moved out of Tamil Tiger-controlled areas to the government-controlled areas. Even in the city of Colombo, today the largest population is from the Tamil community; next come the Moors. The Muslims who are also a minority—they are the second largest—and the Sinhalese form the fewest number of residents in the capital city. So there is no problem with people living together.

What we as expatriates proposed was to share power at the centre, give them a role in the day-to-day government—that's what they said they did not have previously—and also devolution to a certain extent, like the district council at the district level. In addition to that, there is a belief...there is a Panchayati system in India whereby they empower the people at the village level. Most often, the central government and regional governments neglect the people at the grassroots, at the village level. That is to empower them to adopt the Panchayati system to devolve power to districts and bring in all the minorities, give them a role in government at the same time.

Mr. Paul Crête: A previous witness said even if the government wins the battle, there will be problems with terrorist action or other actions for 15 to 20 years. Do you believe that will be the reality? If it is, are some other solutions possible?

● (1705)

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera: I don't believe that. An international committee kept saying earlier it is an unwinnable war; you cannot defeat the Tigers. Within the space of two years after the Tigers launched their final war for liberation, the government retaliated when they cut off water to the farmers in Maavilaru. From that point, the Tigers have been retreating. Today the government has recovered all its usurped territory.

Mr. Asoka Weerasinghe: One more point is that Karuna, or the second in command of the LTTE, who was the commander of the eastern province, packed up terrorism in 2004 and became a democrat. Today, after five years he's in the cabinet and is the minister of national integration. He's now working with other Tamil parties to see what can be done. He more or less said this is dumb. They'll never have a separate state either. After so many years of fighting, he's now a democrat. That's the way it goes. I can see that happening.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Crête: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Crête. Thank you for rewording your statement. I appreciate that.

We'll move to Mr. Lunney.

Mr. James Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just wanted to pick up on a remark that was made recently about Colonel Karuna. I believe he was from the eastern part of the territory. He seems to be a leader who has managed to survive, although I understand he has his own history and has been in jail himself. He's working now with the government. Are you suggesting a cadre of other leaders will come forward if this current leadership is somehow neutralized by the current conflict? Is there a way of resolving this without killing everybody who remains?

Mr. Asoka Weerasinghe: Exactly. Douglas Devananda, who is—

Mr. James Lunney: I don't mean everybody; I mean the Tigers, of course.

Mr. Asoka Weerasinghe: Douglas Devananda, who is a Tamil cabinet minister who looks after Jaffna, was a terrorist who was fighting Prabhakaran. LTTE tried to assassinate him 11 times; he has survived. They might very likely go after Karuna too, but I hope he's going to survive.

Pilliyan, who is now the chief minister of the eastern province, was a child soldier with the LTTE. He too pulled out from Prabhakaran's group in 2004. The people in the eastern province elected him by ballot to be the chief minister. You can see the trend now, so that is going to happen.

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera: If I may, I would comment on that. It is not that the Sinhalese and Tamils cannot get along or that they are so hostile and they will kill each other. They live as neighbours and they work in the same offices in the city in most parts of Sri Lanka. In fact, before, the Sinhalese organized something called the brotherhood train, which started in the deep south in the town of Matara, with several stops on the way. The people willingly came and gave gifts to be given to the displaced Tamil people. It was valued at 25 million rupees. This was taken as far as the rail track went up to the north.

Mr. James Lunney: When did that happen?

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera: That happened in November.

Our own organization, after the eastern province was retaken by the government, provided school books for one of the new schools that the government established there. The children didn't have a school earlier. We provided school books. We provided mosquito nets. And that's happening all the time. The people are, on their own, trying to build bridges.

Mr. James Lunney: I appreciate those remarks.

You were starting in your earlier remarks, but I think you ran out of time, to talk about some of the problems with equitable education, language discrimination, and so on, and access to education for the Tamil minority. I wondered if you had more to contribute to the discussion of how to overcome those problems. You're saying volunteers are already coming forward to try to remedy some of those things. You're talking about donating school books and so on. What do you see as the solutions in helping to reach out and reconcile these communities?

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera: That is happening right now. I know of so many volunteer groups who are running medical clinics, medical camps, in remote areas, in Tamil villages. There are Sinhalese groups who have been taking things for these displaced Tamils, so it's not an isolated event. I was there in Sri Lanka for two months, from December to February, and while I was there in fact there were things like medical equipment.... Even quite recently we funded the shipping of six physicians' packs, costing $30,000, to be taken for caring for and looking after the IDPs. There's a second shipment to follow, so it's ongoing.

As far as education goes, maybe whatever shortcomings are there can be worked out. For instance, Jaffna had some of the best schools, but because of the separatist violence the standards dropped, and today the very thing they complained about—standardization—is helping the children there to gain admission to the universities, because they've become a deprived district under the same formula.

● (1710)

Mr. James Lunney: I'm looking at this scenario that you're painting, and it's a very optimistic one, and we certainly want to be optimistic.

I have my own concerns about remnants of terrorist organizations that blend in with a community and are very hard to root out. We certainly hope for the best here.

What role do you see for Canada in that scenario then? What recommendations would you have? How do you see Canada participating in reconciliation and rebuilding?

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera: Canada could certainly help with the redevelopment of that region. There is a lot of work to be done, because 20 years have gone by and we have seen pictures of the civilians coming out of the northern areas that have been retaken by the Sri Lankan forces. The people have lived in extreme poverty while the Tamil Tigers were building beautiful palaces for themselves—air conditioned houses, every facility for the LTTE leadership. The people's labour was exploited to dig trenches and to dig bunkers, and they had to also pay a human tax. They had to donate a child or some member of the family. This was a big cost that they had to bear.

At the moment, what most of the people there have been telling some of my friends who have visited them is that all they want is to have peace, equality, opportunities, and a chance for their children to go back to school, which they very often lacked because they've been nabbed on their way to school or at religious festivals.

So if the security situation improves, things will move along and there will be space for everybody. I hope also that the Tamil community will not isolate themselves by only forming Tamil-only parties, but that they'll join the mainstream parties and voice their views and win their demands through the electoral process.

Mr. James Lunney: I certainly hope you're right on that one.

I'm going to pass over to Lois, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Lois Brown: Thank you, Mr. Lunney, and thank you, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: Actually, we're out of time. I want to mention that we are not going to go to committee business today. My intention for Wednesday, when we have only two witnesses coming in, is that we may extend past the one hour and have at least a half hour for committee business. We want to look at our Washington trip. That's my intent.

We'll get back to you, Ms. Brown.

Mr. Dewar.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our guests.

I wanted to know from either of you, and maybe both of you have an opinion on this, how you would describe the operation the government is engaged in right now. What kind of operation is it?

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera: It is to eliminate the Tamil Tiger fighters. But they're not going into the no-fire zone. They've been battling them in the remaining sliver that the Tigers are holding. Also, they've been trying to dig up all the hidden weapons, because if some of these Tamil Tigers manage to get into the jungle, this would prevent them from again causing trouble in the country.

They have been consolidating the area that they regained and they have been making a search. Just yesterday, they found something like 1,400 guns and a large stock of explosives. They're trying to remove these weapons of war to prevent a similar situation from arising.

Of course, I have heard that they have agreed to a humanitarian pause. Even if you have a ceasefire, the Tigers are not going to release the civilians; it's not possible to bring them to safety. They have not been attacking the Tigers, although the Tigers continue to attack the forces from within the safe zone, as they have their heavy guns and their bunkers right in the midst of the safe zone.

● (1715)

Mr. Asoka Weerasinghe: If the government wanted to clean up the Tamil Tigers, they could have done that two weeks ago. They are going very slowly because of the trapped civilians. According to the government, they have a zero tolerance for harming the civilians who are trapped. That's the reason.

Mr. Paul Dewar: What both of you have described is what I would call a military operation. Would you agree that this is in effect what is happening?

Mr. Asoka Weerasinghe: Exactly. I think—

Mr. Paul Dewar: The reason I ask is that I found it very peculiar that the prime minister described this as a humanitarian operation. I'm sorry, but from my vantage point there's a large difference between what you describe—you're using the military to basically eliminate an enemy, and fair enough, that's your choice. But from my vantage point it is not a humanitarian operation.

Would you agree that the prime minister's comment that this is a humanitarian operation is a bit much?

Mr. Asoka Weerasinghe: As far as I'm concerned, it is a humanitarian operation, because they are trying to liberate the people who have been caught under the Tamil Tigers. That is a liberation of the people. If you liberate the people, that is a humanitarian cause, and—

Mr. Paul Dewar: We might disagree on that. I think the prime minister's comments aren't helpful for the support of the international community, when you're using your military to—let's be honest here—wipe out your adversary. I just don't see calling that a humanitarian operation. What you both described to me, when I asked you what you thought it was—and you agreed—is that it's a military operation. I think that does a disservice for understanding what actually is happening and isn't helpful at all.

Mr. Asoka Weerasinghe: To the degree that I understand it, they are trying to liberate the people who are being held back by the Tamil Tigers.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Well, whatever. I find that interesting. I don't think it's helpful to have it described as a humanitarian operation. It's the barrel of a gun.

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera: I'd like to add a word. This terrorist problem has been going on for nearly 30 years. The people in the south are not sure, when they go to work, whether they will return home—

Mr. Paul Dewar: I don't want to get into that. I was simply wanting to know your point of view.

I'll finish by saying that I understand your point of view, and you were very clear in your comments. I just wanted to state it, because from what you're saying, you believe the government is on the right path. I just don't think that many of us would maybe have the same point of view.

It doesn't help your cause much, though, when you suggest that NGOs are somehow involved in a conspiracy to deliver weapons or convert people. I just have to say that for the record, and I thank you for your presentation today.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dewar.

Ms. Brown.

Ms. Lois Brown: Thank you.

Mr. Weerasinghe, in your statement you say that only now, after 26 years, are some countries, including Canada, taking an interest in this terrorist war. Yet we have heard from other presenters that there has been considerable intervention in the past, including a peace negotiation presented by Norway. What were the successes of that Norway peace negotiation, which lasted six years? There was a period of time where there was relative—and I'm using this word cautiously—peace in Sri Lanka. Why did peace negotiations break down? I'm looking for some nugget in that peace negotiation that could be built on in the future. There must have been something that was part of its success.

● (1720)

Mr. Asoka Weerasinghe: With respect to the Norwegian peace accord, it was unfortunate that the Tamil Tigers, according to the Scandinavian peace monitors, had by July 2006 violated it 7,306 times. That says what happened. During that time, they brought in 11 shiploads of weapons to this province, and the Scandinavian monitors couldn't do anything about it. The 12th one was let go because the Scandinavian head of the peace monitors tipped the captain of the ship and they got away. The fighting going on now is with all the weapons that were brought in.

Ms. Lois Brown: You're talking about the breakdown. But in the peace negotiation, what was it that both sides agreed to? There must have been something that attracted both sides to the table.

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera: There was a move by the LTTE. After the war and the terrorism, several countries started banning the LTTE. Their sources of funding were blocked. They offered to come to a ceasefire, and they said that they were willing to settle for something short of separation. At the talks, they only bought time to rebuild their forces. They were not interested in any settlement short of separation. The monitoring mission only recorded the number of violations. They had no way of preventing it. They were just keeping score—this side has killed so many military or so many civilians. They just kept records, but that was not effective in preventing violations.

Ms. Lois Brown: You don't believe that peace was negotiated in good faith?

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera: Right. The government thought there was an opportunity to reach a negotiated settlement, but the LTTE was laughing all the time. They never intended to reach any settlement. They were still seeking their separate state, for which they were bringing in weapons, buying time, and delaying.

Ms. Lois Brown: Yet it lasted for six years, so I have to assume that there must have been something that both sides could hold on to. I'd like to explore that further, but I know Mr. Abbott has a question.

The Chair: Mr. Abbott.

Hon. Jim Abbott (Kootenay—Columbia, CPC): At the end of the testimony of the former witnesses, they were talking about caste. I'm wondering if we on this committee, and in Canada, have enough exposure to this issue to understand it. What part does the social structure, and specifically caste, have in the actual conflict? Obviously, it is an immensely complex conflict. It's so complex I can't even start to get my mind around it. What part does the foundation of the society and caste play in this conflict?

Mr. Asoka Weerasinghe: It's a very complex situation, actually, unless you understand the culture of the Tamil community. The word Eelam Tamil is a genus, but the species is.... There are Jaffna Tamils and Batticaloa Tamils, and even to speak in terms of merging the two provinces is not going to help, because the Jaffna Tamils believe they are superior to the eastern Tamils. The eastern Tamils will never accept their authority. That is one of the reasons why Karuna, who is from the eastern province, from eastern Tamil, pulled out.

In terms of a merger, it's not going to work out. It's only going to create more problems. As Professor Matthews said, caste is a hidden problem. People don't realize this. That factor has to come into the equation if people outside want to be involved. You have to understand all of those social aspects.

● (1725)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Mr. Rae.

Hon. Bob Rae: I want to come back to this question of World Vision and the anti-conversion legislation. Dr. Gunasekera, perhaps you could tell us about it. I was frankly surprised by your comments about World Vision, because from my experience, World Vision is a highly reputable charitable organization. Do you share that view?

Second, can you explain the thinking behind the anti-conversion legislation? And can you understand the concerns many of us would have about legislation of that kind, given the size and extent of the Sri Lankan Christian community, with which I'm very familiar, as an Anglican?

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera: World Vision has been engaged in community development work, but the hidden agenda has been conversion as well. There was a presidential commission held earlier. They had to come before the presidential commission. A particular project was highlighted called the Mustard Seed Project. They were going to these rural areas, mostly Buddhist or Hindu, where they would set up little day cares, and they would send in Christians as teachers. They would even try to influence the young minds. They would give them little goodies. They would give them boxes, one with a picture of baby Jesus, the other with a picture of the Buddha. The Buddha's boxes were empty, but the baby Jesus boxes had a lot of goodies inside. That was called the Mustard Seed Project.

They also tried to influence the government doctors who operate in these rural areas. There are some rural hospitals. They would try to give them money. They would pay them money to run clinics on behalf of World Vision. Then they would neglect the hospitals.

One of those doctor didn't cooperate with them. This has been documented. I can forward the details to you. There's a lady from England who went and investigated this. They got some of the kin to lodge a complaint saying that he had abused two of their young female children. They created an issue for this doctor because he was not cooperating with them in running their medical clinics. They wanted to show that they are the people you are to come to if you need any help. They are the people who will provide medical assistance. They are the people who will look after the children in their day cares.

These are things I have become aware of. One was through the presidential commission and one was after a detailed investigation of the scandal, because the doctor didn't give in to the pressure of World Vision.

Regarding the bill, a lot of these people in these rural areas, I think.... I believe there is a rule that you cannot start a church or temple unless there are a certain number of people who would support that church. I don't know how many families there are, maybe 200 families. So instead of opening a church, they would have a prayer house, and they would send a parishioner. Gradually, maybe, they would offer some inducements, along with some gifts. People are poor. In order for them to qualify for this, they would get them to convert to Christianity, and then they would ask them to publicly come and smash a statue of their god, if they are Hindus, or the Buddha's image. Not only that, they got them to do even worse things. When that happened, there was a lot of friction in this village, and there were unnecessary tensions and unnecessary problems.

The anti-conversion bill is to prevent unnecessary conversions. That is the thinking behind that bill.

Hon. Bob Rae: It may be that this is not the time or place to get into this, but it doesn't prevent the legitimate activity of Christian denominations.

Mr. Mahinda Gunasekera: There is nothing to prevent anybody; you are free.... For instance, when I was there on holiday, I was staying with my wife's sister. There were Christian folk who came, knocked on the door, and would chat or hand out literature. There's no problem with that, but these allurements given to the poor, exploiting their poverty and then asking them to go and publicly smash their idols, their religious idols, that is what is causing the problem.

● (1730)

The Chair: Thank you. It's 5:30, so we will adjourn.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

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