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Sri Lanka: Seize this opportunity for true reform

By Justice C.V. Wigneswaran

Come September, the United Nations Human Rights Council will assemble in Geneva for its 30th session. This session marks an important date for Sri Lanka, the United States and the international community: the long-awaited release of the UN report on war crimes committed during Sri Lanka's civil war.

Secretary of State John Kerry in May **urged** Sri Lanka to launch a credible investigation into human rights abuses and to release remaining political prisoners, and added that the U.S. is willing to support these developments with legal and technical assistance. This U.S. political will, ready to support justice and reconciliation in Sri Lanka, and the upcoming release of the UN report on war crimes, which disproportionately affected the ethnic Tamil population, mean the next few months are crucial for pursuing true reform in Sri Lanka.

U.S. leaders have praised progress from newly elected President Maithripala Sirisena, like passing the 19th Amendment that limits the presidency to two terms, but the country's Tamil population in the North and East remains disempowered and displaced. Slow reforms, the delayed release of the UN report and proposed accountability mechanisms that don't meet international standards fuel the growing feeling that genuine justice and reform, a cause long-backed by the U.S. and multilateral organizations, is being sacrificed for domestic political maneuvering.

More than six years after the end of the war – a conflict that left hundreds of thousands internally displaced, sent a million Tamils into exile and killed more than 70,000 Tamil citizens in the final months alone – the Sri Lankan military continues to dominate the landscape in the North and East. Land belonging to Tamil citizens remains in military hands, used for farming, tourism and business activities benefitting the military. Despite government calls for the military to return to its barracks, the army is still very visible, intimidating men, women and children and denying their right to return to their normal lives.

Meanwhile, families are desperate to learn the whereabouts of the estimated 146,000 people who remain unaccounted for years after the war's end. But the current government has inexplicably delayed in releasing the full list of political prisoners who have been held for years without charge.

Given this situation, reforms can and must be undertaken now to pave the way for a just and inclusive society.

As Sri Lanka tries to move beyond its corrupt and troubled past, the US and the international community can play a large role in supporting the country's economic development and accountability and reconciliation processes. The U.S. has already played a leading role at the Human Rights Council – for which we are grateful - and President Obama **recognized** the election of President Sirisena as a "symbol of hope for those who support democracy all around the world."

The journey toward reform and accountability in Sri Lanka will be difficult, but it can succeed. And leaders in Washington can help Sri Lanka on this journey by providing legal and technical assistance while urging Sirisena to undertake meaningful reforms: demilitarization, returning all Tamil lands and establishing a credible, independent and victim-centered accountability mechanism.

Other reforms mean changing the government's structure to a more devolved system, where all regions are able to make decisions on behalf of their local communities, as well as demilitarization and allowing Tamils to return to their lands and homes, freely and without fear. Only 1,000 acres of land have been returned to their rightful owners through the government's complicated land restitution process. While the government claims that total military-controlled land only amounts to 10,000 acres, the reality on the ground exceeds 64,000 acres in the Northern Province.

Lasting reform also means revitalizing economic development in war-torn areas, an avenue where U.S. assistance can have an enormous impact. Trade and engagement with the U.S. can empower all Sri Lankans, especially Tamils, who suffered the brunt of the war's horrors and continue to scrape by without jobs, homes or economic opportunities. To restore true peace and stability to our island, President Sirisena must be willing to move on much needed reforms, and the U.S. must play a supporting and guiding role throughout the process.

Sri Lankans must not wait another six years for a shot at justice and reconciliation.

Wigneswaran is chief minister of Sri Lanka's Northern Province.

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