



YES

SIOBHAIN MCDONAGH
Labour MP for Mitcham and Morden

AS A SIGNATORY TO THE COMMONWEALTH'S HARARE DECLARATION, SRI LANKA SHOULD BE COMMITTED TO THE DEFENCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS, DEMOCRACY AND THE RULE OF LAW.

However, under the guise of a campaign of liberation, its government has pursued a brutal military campaign. This year alone 2,000 lives have been lost – more than in Gaza. There have been reports of unlawful killings, enforced disappearances and other human rights violations. The government has shelled its own people, even in designated

“safe zones”, and is accused of using banned weapons like white phosphorous, and lethal cluster bombs.

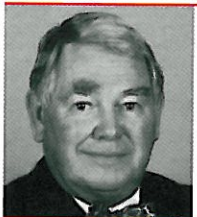
Dissent is treated as treason, criticism is violently suppressed and Sri Lanka is one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists. The media and aid agencies are banned by the government, which is why these terrible events haven't made the evening news.

Sri Lanka's conduct is manifestly incompatible with the Harare declaration. Last month, MPs from all parties joined protests in London outside a meeting of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group – which is the guardian of the Commonwealth's fundamental values. We want Sri Lanka thrown out of the Commonwealth until: 1) a ceasefire is established; 2) a UN monitoring mission is granted unfettered access to the country; 3) international aid agencies have access to the Vanni region; and 4) its government resumes peace negotiations.

Last year, Sri Lanka lost its seat on the UN human rights council over its poor human rights record. It is high time the Commonwealth took decisive action too.

THE BIG QUESTION...

'Should Sri Lanka **be suspended** from the Commonwealth?



NO

THE RT. HON THE LORD NASEBY
Chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Sri Lanka

SRI LANKA HAS BEEN A VALUED MEMBER OF THE COMMONWEALTH SINCE INDEPENDENCE. IT WAS ONE OF THE ORIGINAL SIGNATORIES TO THE LONDON DECLARATION AND TODAY HOLDS KEY POSITIONS IN FOUR COMMONWEALTH BODIES.

The country has faced terrorism for over 25 years. The Tamil Tigers are elected by no one, their sole objective is to achieve Eelam at any cost. And what a cost: Presidents Gandhi and Premadasa assassinated; hundreds of moderate Tamils murdered; child soldiers recruited in their hundreds to be put on the front line and killed. No wonder these terrorists are proscribed in the US, Canada, UK, EU and other countries.

The Tigers are making a final stand having dragged over 100,000 innocent civilians with them. Every international agency has appealed to the Tigers to release the civilians, yet still they refuse. So much for caring about the Tamil people. Few democratically elected governments face terrorism on this scale.

Yet the armed forces are disciplined: no civilian casualties were reported on the drive to Kilinochichi. Even now, there are little or no air or artillery strikes for fear of harming civilians and the Red Cross and the UN have been given access to the temporary refugee camps.

The challenge for the UK is to deliver money promised by the Blair government for reconstruction. Those Labour MPs who have Tamils in their constituencies should stop playing politics. They should tell the diaspora to stop funding the Tigers so that ordinary Tamils can enjoy peace and rebuild their lives. In the meantime, the government of Sri Lanka continues to take human rights seriously and the country's talented people must be allowed to continue to serve the Commonwealth. There should be no question of suspension.

What's your view?

We'd like to hear what you think about this debate.

Send your comments, criticisms, arguments or praise to the Editor at joanna.bennett@thercs.org

