

**PEACE AND RECONCILIATION IN SRI LANKAN CONTEXT  
REMEMBRANCE DAY COMMEMORATION**

Hon. David Kilgour  
Walter Baker Centre, Nepean  
Ottawa  
14 May 2014

---

In early June, 2009, I visited Sri Lanka as a member of an international delegation just following the defeat of the LTTE. The purpose of the visit, sponsored by the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), was to learn what its vast network of churches in 128 countries could properly do to assist with the humanitarian crisis and national reconciliation. Christian churches across Sri Lanka appeared well placed for bridge-building, being one of the national institutions in the country which enjoyed and maintain today a good mix of members from both the Sinhalese and Tamil communities.

The following are a few personal observations from then, which appear from news and other reports to apply in varying degrees today:

- Major efforts are still required to address the widespread traumas resulting from violence, which left up to 100,000 persons from both major cultural communities dead and hundreds of thousands displaced. The main obstacle remains the legacy of bitterness on both sides, after more than three decades of on-and-off hostilities and worsened by outrageous military actions at the end of the war.
- Some from both major cultural communities criticized the military forces of the other side. Others worried about renewed discrimination against the minority community-discrimination which they firmly believe caused the long national nightmare in the first place. Persons in both groups expressed concern that the plight of the internally-displaced persons across Sri Lanka would only worsen without pressure, oversight and support by international friends of Sri Lanka, such as Canada.
- Many Sri Lankans in 2009 and today are concerned about the weakening of the country's democratic foundations, in particular by the suppression of dissent and lack of protection for journalists. The words then of Sonali Samarasinghe, the Sinhalese widow of Lasantha Wickrematunge, the 2009 UNESCO World Press Freedom Laureate, were piercing: " Our country has entered a Dark Age characterized by

tyranny and state-sponsored terror, where the government publicly, cynically and unapologetically equates democratic dissent to treason. The sinister white van in which the state abducts its perceived enemies, including journalists, many of them never to be seen again, has become a symbol of untold dread... violence against journalists is only the tip of the iceberg..."

- A cabinet minister we met opened the meeting with the comment that was "a time for healing, a time to rebuild trust". He added that one of the keys to future national security for Sri Lanka is a repaired relationship between the government and Sri Lankan Diasporas living across the world.

Now, almost five years later, the situation in Sri Lanka remains terribly complex, with the expectations of its population of various religious communities, the aftermath of decades of civil war, and the realities of regional and global geo-politics. The president himself has given assurances that he wants to incorporate the Tamil population as equal members of the national family. Do he and his ministers now recognize that, unless Tamils are treated with dignity and justice, the seeds of conflict will only be perpetuated. Unfortunately, they have yet to introduce the kind of policies that are needed to give substance to this intention. This is no doubt why the prime ministers of Canada and India declined to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government annual meeting earlier in Colombo.

Within Canada, major efforts must still be made to facilitate a dialogue between the members of our Sinhalese and Tamil communities, who might play a pivotal role in reconciliation within Sri Lanka. In conversations with persons from both communities before and after the 2009 mission, it is evident that there exists a strong desire for peace, although the grievances and misunderstandings are also very much present.

Jehan Perera wrote recently in *the Colombo Telegraph* (April 21, 2014):

*The government has made plans to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the end of the war with a 'Victory Day' celebration in Matara in the Southern Province. But at the opposite end of the country, there will be no such celebration. The government has prohibited any public commemoration of the war's end in the Northern Province...The contrasting manner in which the May 18 events will be remembered in the two extremes of the country will highlight the polarization that continues to exist in post-war Sri Lanka...The failure of national reconciliation will be manifest in the*

*government's celebration and victory parade...An important constituency that the government seems to have lost in recent times is the Muslim community. The attacks on them by Sinhalese nationalist groups...have alienated them from the government.*

### ***National Reconciliation***

Is it not true that the greatest world leaders both today and in history are often those who are bridge builders, who believe in forgiveness and authentic reconciliation. Consider these four:

#### **Abraham Lincoln**

One of the world leaders I've long admired is Abraham Lincoln. Permit me to quote from a 1995 book by David Herbert Donald of Harvard University:

“Certainly, Lincoln was not in favor of punishing the Confederates. (He said) it was ‘his firm resolution to stand for clemency against all opposition.’ He had no wish to capture and try even the leaders of the Confederacy. ‘He hoped there would be no persecution, no bloody work, after the war was over,’ he told the cabinet...The sole item on his agenda was peace...”

#### **Nelson Mandela**

Another is the late Nelson Mandela, who overcame 27 years in prison by an apartheid regime and opted for national reconciliation. Among so many memorable thoughts, he said,

“No one is born hating ... People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite ... There is no passion in playing small because things seem impossible. Everything seems impossible until it is done ... As I walked out the (prison) door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison. For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”

## **Dalai Lama**

Another hero is His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The Tibetan people who have been oppressed for over 60 years by the communist Chinese harbor no hatred or ill feelings towards their oppressors. Instead, their leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, an Honorary Canadian Citizen, always says that when we look at a supposed enemy or adversary, we should always try to think that the other person is also seeking happiness as we are. And that realization should open up our minds and hearts. He says conflicts arise out of exaggerated fear about the other. When we look at a supposed enemy or adversary, we should always try to think that the other person is also seeking happiness as we are. And that realization should open up our minds and hearts. He says conflicts arise out of exaggerated fear about the other. But we can't survive alone. Interdependence is key to our survival. So all conflicts should and must be resolved through dialogue keeping interdependence in mind. Once, the Dalai Lama asked a monk who had spent 20 years in Chinese prison what his biggest challenge had been. The monk replied that it had been the few times he was about to lose his compassion for his tormentors.

## **Desmond Tutu**

Retired Archbishop Desmond Tutu headed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission after the fall of apartheid in South Africa and has worked as a global activist on issues pertaining to democracy, freedom and human rights. His sage advice is that:

“Forgiving and being reconciled to our enemies or our loved ones are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not about patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the hurt, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end only an honest confrontation with reality can bring real healing. Superficial reconciliation can bring only superficial healing.”

## **Conclusion**

I congratulate the National Capital Region Tamil Association (NCRTA) in calling for observance of a week of remembrance between May 11th and May 18th to remember those who lost their lives in the conflict. We all pray that peace and reconciliation will come to Sri Lanka soon. Thank you.