

EIAS Briefing Seminar: Reform, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka

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The need for reconciliation in Sri Lanka is universally accepted. Unfortunately the last few months have seen a plethora of exercises that seem designed to prevent reconciliation. Most recently we have had a sensational film on the British Television Channel 4, almost coinciding with the publication in London of a book by an Australian journalist called Gordon Weiss who had worked in Sri Lanka for the United Nations for a couple of years.

These have roused emotions that had lain dormant, but which are now being orchestrated with characteristic efficiency. Unfortunately the selective approach of these attacks on the Sri Lankan government are glossed over by comparisons by what is presented as a UN Report. It was that in fact that started the flood of allegations that are creating such difficulties for the pursuit of peace.

Ironically, a Report that is not entirely legitimate is thus used to bestow legitimacy on what might be termed cowboy attacks. I say the Darusman Report is not entirely legitimate because, although it is widely referred to as a UN Report, it is only a 'Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka'. The Experts however had a very different view of their role from that of the Secretary General, as is apparent from the fact that they thought they needed to go to Sri Lanka to do their job whereas the Secretary-General's office indicated that this was not essential.

Thus a report on accountability issues was turned into an inquisition with regard to Sri Lanka, and the Secretary-General was not in a position to refute this. Conversely, the experts had the best of both worlds, inasmuch as they could pretend to have conducted an investigation, and claim that there were 'credible allegations' against the Sri Lankan government, whereas all they did was act as a post box for allegations.

Indeed the self-regarding nature of the exercise that has taken place is apparent from the fact that the Panel Report has clearly got massive amounts of material from both Channel 4 and from the Australian Gordon Weiss. The latter thanks almost exclusively in the UN system a South African called Chris du Toit who, while providing Weiss with an example to follow, had served the former apartheid regime as an agent 'training and commanding proxy guerilla forces in the illicit wars fought by South Africa in Angola'. This refers to the forces of Jonas Savimbi, who was very similar to the Tamil Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. Du Toit had set up, with no reference to the Sri Lankan government with whom he was supposed to be working, a network of secret informers, and it seems the Darusman report relies heavily on this rather than on the senior UN officials in Sri Lanka, who were much more positive about what was happening.

Amusingly, I found that the Darusman Report misquotes me, in the same way that Weiss does, both referring to an article in the New York Times, but without looking at my own piece which says something very different. The conclusion is inescapable that Darusman simply copied from Weiss, without bothering to check references, as indeed they do throughout the Report, even to the extent of misquoting spectacularly from another Report of the Secretary General.

Similarly, much of their more tentative conclusions are based on material supplied by Channel 4. If either of these critics were serious about what Darusman claims is the purpose of his report, to get Sri Lanka to investigate allegations against its forces, they would surely have supplied the government with any purported evidence. But this has been scrupulously avoided. Channel 4 has sedulously refused to provide anything, claiming that we can obtain it from the UN, while the Panel refused point blank to appear before the Commission Sri Lanka had set up for the purpose.

Channel 4 indeed went further, and did not supply the tape of the first report it made against Sri Lanka available to the UN Special Rapporteur who wished to investigate its authenticity. The Rapporteur did not admit this, but his experts revealed that they had got another copy – which was different in salient particulars – from the body that had initially supplied Channel 4. With regard to the later material, the determination to keep it from the Sri Lankan government suggests a very different agenda from the ostensible one of ensuring prosecution of those against whom a credible case can be made.

It seems then that there is a very different agenda at work. This is in line with what was expressed two years ago by then British Foreign Secretary David Miliband, who talked in the House of Commons about a War Crimes investigation. This contradicted the position of his representatives in Sri Lanka who claimed that the effort of several European countries, led by Britain, to have a special session about Sri Lanka at the Human Rights Council in Geneva was designed to ensure proper treatment of the Tamils who had been displaced in the fighting.

The War Crimes game continued over the next two years, and was floated also by those elements in the American government who had decided that the more coherent approach to combating terror of the Bush government had to be abandoned, at least in areas where consciences could be salved without actually abandoning American interests or troops. The sanctimonious claim was that true reconciliation was not possible unless what were termed accountability issues were addressed. However, as Wikileaks has revealed, the American ambassador on the ground made it clear that the Tamils in Sri Lanka were not concerned about this, but wanted rather progress in their own lives.

Unfortunately, politicians in the West are not really concerned about Tamils in Sri Lanka or what they want. They are concerned only with their own constituencies, in theory with promoting their welfare, in practice – as Wikileaks has again made clear in the case of David Miliband – with getting their votes. To me there is something ghoulish about Western politicians playing with the welfare and the lives of people in distant places simply to satisfy their own desire for electoral success – but I suppose that is what democracy entails, in a society the prey of media manipulation and the strategies of powerful lobbyists.

I have responded in detail to the allegations in some detail in various documents, and in one sense we should be grateful to these characters since they have made clear the necessity to tell the real story, as it happened. But we must also bear in mind that people believe what they want to believe. The attacks will continue from people who refuse to look at evidence. If a report commissioned by the Secretary General ignored the evidence of the senior UN personnel on the ground, and instead relied on a few who had been repudiated previously by their seniors, one must recognize that rationality has nothing to do with it, and that political and emotional considerations will trump evidence.

In that regard, the strongest emotions are those of some members of the Tamil diaspora who put all their eggs as it were into the LTTE basket, and are unable to accept that their days of terrorism are over. But if we cannot do anything about them, at any rate not until the Western politicians they cajole and bully develop a more moral approach to politics, we must work concertedly on making things better for our Tamil citizenry at home. We must then proceed with our programmes of Reform, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation, targeting primarily the people of Sri Lanka, but hoping that enough of those abroad will liaise productively with people at home to realize that resurrecting images of terror will serve little practical purpose except that of revenge. We may then succeed in convincing those who are truly concerned about Sri Lanka that they should apply their energies to the welfare of those who had suffered, in particular from the hands of the LTTE in the last couple of decades, but previously from neglect by successive Sri Lankan governments too.

We should begin, here, in noting the reasons for so many Sri Lankans to have left their country, why from the sixties onward so many people, Sinhalese as well as Tamil, thought the best thing about Sri Lanka was the way out. This is absurd, given the potential of Sri Lanka, and its beauty, the greatest compass of natural beauty in such a small space in the world – but the fact remains that we closed down opportunities for our people, especially our young people, over the years.

I do not think this was deliberate. It was part of what seemed an intellectual consensus at the time Sri Lanka got independence, the notion that equality was one of the greatest goods available, that this had to be achieved through the state, and that leveling downward was the best way of achieving equality. This contributed to insensitivity, and indeed discrimination, in that politicians concentrated on those they considered the most deprived, often translated into those they saw as their particular clients in the first past the post Westminster style political system we had.

This explains two actions that had far-reaching negative consequences for Tamils in particular. The first was the declaration of Sinhala as the only official language of Sri Lanka. This was no different from what has been done in other countries such as Malaysia or Indonesia, but it was done suddenly, and imposed on top of an education system that had entrenched monolingualism in our different communities. That had been done in the forties, when the principle of education in the mother tongue was made compulsory. Albeit in theory egalitarian, this resulted in generations unable to communicate with each other, with no serious effort to ensure knowledge of the other language, or of English as a link language. This had appalling consequences with regard to employment, after Sinhala was made the only official language, and with regard to dealings with the public service, when monolinguals in one language had to seek support from those who were monolingual in another language.

Similarly, when standardization was introduced in 1972, the consequences were negative for many. In theory positive discrimination is an acceptable practice, and at that time certainly it was not racially oriented, since Tamils from hitherto underprivileged areas, the Eastern Province, the Wannu, the Hill Country, benefited as much as Sinhalese from such areas in the South. But the areas that were hardest hit were Colombo and Jaffna and, whereas the youngsters of Colombo had alternative opportunities, in particular a relatively prosperous private sector, other professional qualifications, easier access to foreign qualifications, the bright students of Jaffna had no such compensations. And then, in 1979, after standardization had been abolished in 1977, it was reintroduced in another guise, with a racial rationale.

These problems however could have been corrected and, though it took a long time for this to happen, action has now been taken, with Tamil made an official language in 1987, the introduction of compulsory bilingualism in the school system in the nineties, the recent regulations that make knowledge of the other official language mandatory for new recruits to the public sector. Much more however needs to be done, and that is why we are also reforming our education system, encouraging private institutions and input into tertiary education and skills training, strengthening the English medium option that was introduced in 2001, promoting opportunities for youngsters to meet and realize that they have much more in common than they had hitherto thought. But much more requires to be done, and I hope that the diaspora will contribute to educational exchanges, to endowing scholarships at your old schools, to supporting training for youngsters who were deprived, in particular the former combatants who had to abandon schooling early when they were conscripted.

Another area in which reform has begun, but needs to be fast forwarded, is that of recruitment to the public sector, and in particular to the security forces. Minorities continue to occupy high positions in the armed forces, and in particular in training establishments where they were relatively safe from the particular animosity against them evinced by the LTTE, but recently recruitment has been less. With regard to the military, security considerations were involved, including the targeting by the LTTE of Tamil speaking officers, even during the so-called Ceasefire Agreement period, but there was still continuing recruitment in some areas, including to the Cadet Corps, for education as well as cadet training. Sadly the Ministry of Education seems to have prevented the Ministry of Defence from continuing with this programme, which had facilitated the commissioning of Tamil officers even while fighting was going on.

This is particularly important since we need the involvement of all our citizens in security activity. For, while the discrimination of the sixties and seventies led to the initial desire to leave Sri Lanka, this process was exacerbated by what I believe was state sponsored violence against Tamils on three distinct occasions following the election of the 1977 government of President Jayewardene. This government continued to be in favour with Western countries that have recently discovered a commitment to human rights, and more startlingly continued to be supported by even Tamils in Colombo, who were more concerned about class than race. That only changed with the attacks on Tamils in Colombo too in 1983. But previously the violence unleashed on less privileged Tamils, in 1977 in a few areas, and then in many more in 1981, had laid the groundwork for the deep emotions we see in so many expatriates.

I understand and sympathize then with those who left our shores, not only for economic reasons in the seventies, but for the attacks on Tamils in the early eighties, the burning of the Jaffna Public Library in 1981, the systematic assaults of July 1983. Those have not been repeated, but we must appreciate why, in the confrontational approach those brutalities engendered, tensions continued. I believe that ensuring that our security forces are multi-ethnic is vital for restoring confidence, and government should fast forward programmes towards this end.

I should note that the police continued to recruit from all communities at all levels, and at the height of the war 700 odd officers passed out from the Training School at Kallady in the East. However, applications were few, given fear of the LTTE. Fortunately this changed after the LTTE in Sri Lanka was destroyed, and a few thousand applied, and a couple of batches of several hundred each have now been trained, and appointed, in particular to stations in the North.

The same applied to the public sector, and we believe there will be greater interest now that the threats that confronted so many bright youngsters in the past have been eliminated. But we need to enhance educational opportunities for youngsters, especially in areas from which there was never much recruitment to the public sector, given the neglect of education in those areas, the Wannu and many parts of the East. I am delighted that the present Government Agent for Kilinochchi is the first person from that area to have risen to such a high position in the public service, and her appointment to that area, after strenuous service in Batticaloa when that district was recovering after it was fully liberated from the LTTE in 2007, was suitable recognition of her dedication to the country in difficult circumstances. I can only hope then that efforts to resurrect the LTTE abroad, and to continue to argue for separatism, will not blight the ready willingness of youngsters in Sri Lanka, from the North as well as the East, to take their proper role in the government sector.

However, we need also to recognize that the orthodoxies of the sixties and seventies, when statist socialism reduced the size of the pie – so that everyone's share, if increasingly equal, was decreasing in actual content, as John Rawls so tellingly put it in his 'Theory of Justice' – have given way to an almost universal understanding that the engine of growth and development needs to be the private sector. The excesses and the insensitivities of the crony capitalism that was the alternative, in much of Asia, to statist socialism in the seventies must be avoided, and we must continue with and develop the services that ensure equality of opportunity, education and health and infrastructure and utilities. But we need also to ensure much more initiative, much more investment, much more support for entrepreneurship.

In this regard, I would like to mention an initiative undertaken with part of my decentralized budget. I have a particular concern for the former combatants, who were so brutally abused, but who have within a short period seemed to adjust, into the bright and energetic youngsters they would have been if not forced into combat by the LTTE. I had wanted to start a Primary English Training programme for the girls but. by the time I got my funds, all the girls had been released. The Commissioner General requested instead that some of the funds be used for a training programme in psycho-social care, with some of the former combatants being trained to use such skills in the Wannu area. That programme, conducted by a body based in London, including expatriate Sri Lankans, was concluded successfully, and sufficient funding has now been secured for a follow up. But I also wanted some skills training, and we decided therefore on an entrepreneurship development programme.

This was an eye-opener. Over a hundred former combatants applied, and thirty were selected, and proved extremely enterprising. You can see some details of the event, including the very heartening thank you speeches, on the Reconciliation Website, www.peaceinsrilanka.org – the very first articles on the home page, for which you have to scroll all the way down, since that was what I used first when I revived this website. But what also impressed me was the conceptualization skills. Asked to suggest areas in which enterprises could be set up, two groups chose agri-business, the two others construction. This fits in well with what government has been planning, to make a much better and productive place of the Wannu, neglected for so long by successive Central governments, by the much more advanced entrepreneurs and educationists of Jaffna, and most shamefully by the LTTE who prospered there and did not permit modernization, advanced education or better services despite the funds pouring in from 2002 onward. The area is incredibly fertile and, with the irrigation schemes now being developed, it will provide abundant harvests. Indeed, even at the height of the war, the paddy harvest was excellent, and government

actually purchased stocks from the area for distribution to the displaced, even though we knew that the LTTE would commandeer much of the payment.

We need however to ensure that the inhabitants of the area benefit from their labour, and not middlemen. To promote food processing and added value products is essential, and we believe the youngsters there can take on the challenge. But it would be helpful if they could be provided with start up funds, and I hope some organizations abroad will think of collecting funds for micro-credit schemes for the area.

With regard to construction, it must be obvious that, with the rebuilding going on, there are great opportunities for workers as well as suppliers. Unfortunately much of this now benefits people from elsewhere, but it will not take much to build on the vocational training systems already started, while also developing management and accounting skills. In the short term, as well as in the long run, empowering the people of the area to participate actively in development is the only way of ensuring an equitable share of the prosperity the whole country should be moving towards, now that the terrorist threat, which blighted the Wannu in particular, has been removed.

I believe government has done extremely well thus far in the resettlement process. As at 3rd July, only 11.500 persons were left in the Welfare Centre in Vavuniya, of the near 300,000 who were displaced in 2009. They will be resettled in the next two months, while the last Welfare Centre in Jaffna, which has just 96 persons, will be closed next week with their resettlement in Mullaitivu. Given the difficulties we faced two years ago, with massive demining required, the fact that well before the end of this year there will be no need for centres for the displaced is a tremendous achievement, not seen elsewhere in similar situations, and it is sad that little appreciation of this has been expressed internationally.

It should also be noted that resettlement was accompanied by the provision of basic infrastructure, including schools, roads, water and electricity and better communications. We also restored the local administration, led by extremely experienced Government Agents, all of them Tamil, some of whom did a superb job even while they had to work in areas controlled by the LTTE before 2009. The lady who ran Mullaitivu and supervised the distribution of supplies till just a few months before the conflict ended, is now in charge of Jaffna. One of her greatest achievements, it should be noted, was in conducting the national Ordinary Level Examination in December 2008, for the children too of those the LTTE had forced into going along with them in their retreat from the Western part of the Wannu. The LTTE asked that the examination be boycotted, but the people did not give in and, after some sporadic efforts at violent prevention, their will prevailed.

The gentleman who looked after Kilinochchi, and kept all services going right up to the time our forces took over the town, with hardly any civilian casualties, now heads the Secretariat in Mannar. The lady who was in charge of Vavuniya right through the period of conflict and displacement is still there, and ably developing new initiatives, while as mentioned Kilinochchi is looked after by the first senior member of the Administrative Service born and bred in that area. In Mullaitivu we have someone who previously worked in Mannar during the conflict, with first hand experience of the problems faced by the displaced.

However, while appreciating the work of these senior officials, we can do much better in developing human resources more comprehensively. With regard to the public sector this is true not only of the North, since the second and third layers of administrators nationwide, given the decline in communication skills and decision making capacities, are not as capable yet as the senior officials mentioned above. But we need too to develop local community leaders, and mechanisms for ensuring that the schools for instance have teachers as well as

equipment, that in addition to the main hospitals we have midwives and social workers and child care officials to fill up the cadre positions that are now empty. Proper training, better deployment and more efficient monitoring are essential to ensure that all areas have proper access to services that are essential.

And, while affirming that government is responsible for ensuring the provision of such services, we need to develop private public partnerships to facilitate more effective delivery, whilst also developing simpler and more accessible structures of both responsibility and accountability. In the ongoing negotiations with Tamil political parties, we should also discuss the establishment of better structures at all levels, so as to ensure empowerment of the people, on whose behalf government functions. For too long now our debates have concentrated on the balance of power between politicians from different areas, whereas we should also be thinking of how power can be exercised effectively, with transparency and accountability.

A lead role in this process can I believe be played by the former combatants, who have shown a readiness to involve themselves actively in the rehabilitation process. Of the 11,000 initially under Rehabilitation, over 6,000 have now been reintegrated, including all the girls. Of those left, initially it was felt that just under 1,000 would have to be prosecuted, but the Commissioner General is of the view that the vast majority should in fact be released, and the numbers of those whose cases are being looked at has been reduced to about 300. The programme it should be noted included a range of activities (including a lively marriage ceremony for about fifty couples, involving Christian as well as Hindu clergy. Of particular importance was training in psycho-social counseling, which continues a great need. As mentioned they have shown initiative as well as understanding of the needs of the area, and with sufficient investment and micro-credit, we look forward to their contribution to exploiting the economic potential of the region.

Using such talent, we need to develop structures that enhance inclusive approaches to monitoring and policy development, even though decision making will rest in the hands of those elected for the purpose at different levels. We have made a start on this with the much more healthy relationship between parties on the Standing Committees of Parliament, as I can testify with regard to the Committees on Public Enterprises and on Standing Orders on which I serve. We are also trying to strengthen the role of the Consultative Committees, and it is good to see members of all parties actively involved in at least some of these Committees and the positive approaches of the Ministers concerned when problems are raised. This approach needs to be strengthened in the regions too.

In this respect, the appointment of a Select Committee to finalize proposals for constitutional reform is a welcome measure. We need to remember that any changes will need support in Parliament and it is best to involve all stakeholders early. Discussions with the TNA, which represents a greater proportion of the Tamils of the North than other Tamil parties, will continue and any agreement between TNA and government will then have greater weight obviously in the Select Committee deliberations. However we all need to remember what happened on two previous occasions. Both pacts with Mr Chelvanayakam, by Mr Bandaranaike and Mr Senanayake, were defeated by rabble rousing in the country at large by the main opposition along with hostility from extremists within the governing party.

Then, a decade ago, when Mrs Kumaratunga thought she had support from both the TULF and the main opposition, she was defeated in a pincer movement. The TULF, under pressure

I believe from the LTTE which had assassinated Mr Tiruchelvam, refused to support the measures while the UNP attacked them from a racist perspective, and the poor President found the majority she had hoped to command decimated. . In a context in which so many changes can happen, government should work in terms of the current political situation, and be sensitive, as all parties need to be, to the people who put them into Parliament. Fortunately the LTTE is no longer present to exercise influence as it claimed to do before, when it dictated what happened in elections in the North and parts of the East.

I am pleased too that Government has now produced proposals with regard to a Second Chamber based on equal representation for Districts or Provinces. Though this is not a substitute for developing more effective structures on the ground to ensure the empowerment of people with regard to matters that affect them closely, it is also important to ensure a stronger voice for the periphery at matters that will be decided at the Centre. All parties agree that security matters, including financial and food security, need to be entrusted to a Central government, and it was a pity that previously there was no interest in ensuring greater participation of other interests in decision making in these areas. Active involvement of all segments of society in policy issues and decisions is essential, and it is a welcome advance that this too is now recognized on all sides.

It is also important to entrench rights as well as responsibilities and to ensure public awareness of the basic principles on which government and society should operate. At the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights, we developed a Human Rights Action Plan, which was near finalization at the end of 2009. Unfortunately, with a series of elections, and then changes in Ministry functions, this was held up. With the Attorney General taking over and steering the principle through Cabinet last August, we were able to have final consultations with civil society and the officials who formed the steering committee. The final draft was then prepared by a special consultant, and is now before Cabinet. Perhaps even more importantly, our Ministry was able in 2009 to get a draft of a Bill of Rights, as the President had pledged in his 2005 manifesto. That too was put on hold during the election period but, with the Action Plan recommending a dedicated agency for Human Rights, I hope that the Bill too can be finalized by that Agency and, after going before Cabinet, be entrenched soon in the Constitution.

But, apart from fulfilling these pledges which our Ministry managed to advance significantly even during the conflict period, it is also imperative that Government puts in place better communication strategies, in particular to convey information to, and respond to the concerns of, those who are not intrinsically supportive of Government. Much energy is expended on communicating with those who are appreciative of what is being done, and this is important since no Government should neglect those from whom it derives its strength. But it is more important to communicate also with those who have doubts, and in this area Government has much to do.

We have allowed remarkable achievements to be ignored or forgotten. Two nights ago I had dinner with Sir John Holmes, former head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and we recalled the manner in which there were allegations in 2009 that we intended to keep the displaced for years in what were termed internment camps. He commented, as we knew indeed from the positive manner in which his Office worked with government, that he had not believed that story. But we have failed to make it clear that,

not only was that a canard, but that we settled the displaced much more swiftly than elsewhere.

But I too am guilty of forgetting. When I sent a memo to government in August 2009 suggesting that we were too slow, I was reminded of how the displaced in the East had been settled as swiftly as pledged – but also that a target is not accomplished by achieving half the target in half the time prescribed. In the North we had even greater difficulties with regard to demining than in the East, but we ploughed on, if that is the right word, at great expense to government, though India assisted and then later UNHCR also chipped in.

And let it not be forgotten that, in dealing with the displaced of 2009, we had also to work with those who had been displaced for one decade or two, in particular the Muslims expelled from the North in 1990 by the LTTE. While rehabilitating thousands of former cadres, we had also to pay special attention to the child soldiers who were finally rescued, after years of ineffective efforts to stop this ghastly practice of the LTTE, and were given schooling in one of the best schools in Colombo.

Infrastructure has been developed apace, and the East indeed has been transformed in the last couple of years with communications having opened the way to much more trade. More work in this regard remains to be done in the North but, with the rebuilding of roads and the railway, there will be greater exchange of persons as well as of goods. In this regard support for increasing exchanges between young persons would also be welcome.

I was pleased that one of the foreign journalists who interviewed me, having begun with what seemed a hostile approach, said at the end that there were many matters which were not known internationally. In one sense that is understandable, because the media obviously prefers bad news to good, since that is what people are interested in. But I believe it is also our fault that we have not communicated better, not only to the media, but also to all those who want a better Sri Lanka for all our people.

In particular we need to publicize the work of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission, and the efforts to carry out its interim recommendations. A committee was appointed for this purpose but, since it consists primarily of bureaucrats, it has not effectively communicated the steps that have been taken, in particular with regard to legal requirements. Progress on language rights too needs to be monitored, with planning more coherently, and with public input, to correct deficiencies. In this regard the Attorney General, who chairs the Committee, has been overwhelmed with work, as indicated above too, but a system is now in place to ensure monitoring of the work as well as increasing public awareness.

Now that the terror and violence in Sri Lanka is over, we need also to overcome the suspicions that remain. In Australia I was pleased that one member of a Sinhalese group that had worked hard against LTTE propaganda told me, after I spoke there, that though he found it difficult to trust Tamils, he realized the effort had to be made. I spoke too to Tamils there, and was pleased that many of them had also forgotten the suspicions of the past and wanted to work together for development of the country as a whole. But I realize that getting over their suspicions will also be difficult, and we in government need to work concertedly to reassure them, to engage with those willing to move forward. It is vital that those abroad, who can remember only the distant past, will not endeavour to revive tensions, but will rather visit the country and see what they can do to help, their people of course, but through that the country as a whole.

Sadly these hopes have been affected badly by the recent Channel 4 film. I was particularly saddened by the comments of the young people from both the Sinhala and Tamil communities, second generation Britons, whom we had facilitated earlier this year on a visit organized by the Royal Commonwealth Society. They had returned to Britain full of ideas about, as they put it, bringing the communities together in Britain, in encouraging dialogue, and in providing practical assistance to the affected communities in Sri Lanka. They spoke of educational assistance, and of providing micro-credit, but they had also discussed support to the Indian Tamil community, which had not been involved in terrorist activity, whose leaders indeed have been in government for decades, but which still suffers from educational and other disparities.

The group came together for a discussion with me last Monday, and mentioned how the video had again driven people apart. They too realized that this sort of polarization is intended by those who would prefer to hold Sri Lanka back from developing as a pluralistic society, ensuring better opportunities for all its people.

The people of Sri Lanka, all over the country, but in particular those in the North, suffered from terrorism, from forced conscription of children, from execution for dissent, from deprivation of services including the food we sent up to them. We need to make clear, if only to assuage the worries of those who watched with concern our overcoming of terrorists, that we did our best throughout for the civilians who were suffering. It should be better known, for instance, that the ICRC recorded its appreciation of the support our navy extended with regard to evacuation, and mentioned in particular the discipline and the kindness of our sailors who helped with the evacuation of nearly 14,000 people brought down during the conflict. But it should also be known that only 4,500 were wounded by war, with another couple of thousand who were sick, while over 7,000 were described by the ICRC as bystanders. If emergency evacuation also included so many bystanders, it can be seen that claims made as to the injured could not have been entirely accurate. And that in turn means that claims about the numbers killed should be treated with greater circumspection than sensational films or books indicate.

Such matters need to be carefully considered, with precise attention to the statistics maintained by various agencies, international as well as national. That will help in making clear the generally humane way in which government operated, as is evident from the written appreciations sent by the heads of both the UN and the ICRC. We need to do this soon, so that those who are genuinely concerned about the Tamil people in Sri Lanka will be able to understand what they went through, and help to recompense them for what they suffered in a militarized situation. But above all we need to make it clear that the participation of all our citizens, including those now settled abroad, will prove invaluable in the reconciliation, the rehabilitation and the rebuilding that we need swiftly to achieve. The enthusiasm and commitment of the youngsters the RCS brought together was heartening, that despite the criticisms of extremists on all sides, they continue to work together. We must not let the divisive tactics of the leftovers of the LTTE, and the agents they co-opt in so many different ways, destroy that enthusiasm and commitment.