

உலகத் தமிழர் பேரவை
Global Tamil Forum



Her Majesty The Queen
Buckingham Palace
London SW1A 1AA

3rd October 2013

Open Letter

Your Majesty the Queen,

I write to express my grave concerns regarding the current situation in Sri Lanka and to state the reasons why I believe the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Colombo this November will be an embarrassment to Your Majesty's beloved Commonwealth and to the values it holds most dear.

Given Your Majesty's dedication to and passion for the Commonwealth, I can imagine that the decision not to attend CHOGM in Sri Lanka was a difficult one to make. The fact that this will be the first time since 1973 that Your Majesty has been unable to participate highlights the importance of the event in the Commonwealth calendar. Indeed, it is at CHOGM where many of the landmark decisions and statements by this association have been made. In Lusaka, Zambia, in 1979, the Commonwealth united in the aim *"to rid the world of the evils of racism"*, and condemned apartheid as an *"affront to humanity"*. The 1991 CHOGM saw the realisation of the Harare Declaration, with human rights and democracy expressed as core principles of the Commonwealth. In the wake of the adoption of the new Charter earlier this year, the 2013 CHOGM should have been a time to celebrate the association's renewal and to safeguard the Commonwealth's future effectiveness.

However, this will not happen. Instead, we will be faced by the appalling prospect of a Government in clear violation of so many of the association's values becoming the Chair of the Commonwealth for the next two years. Rather than focussing on its theme of *"Growth with Equity; Inclusive Development"*, the event will be eclipsed by the on-going human rights concerns on the island. An acrimonious and divided CHOGM is likely to unfold with the Canadian Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, and I hope others, staying away, due to the human rights abuses and the lack of post armed conflict accountability and reconciliation.

In Your Majesty's speech at the Commonwealth reception in March, you noted that *"throughout the ages, Charters have been seen as special documents, designed with care to stand the test of time."* Hope was expressed that *"the Charter will reinvigorate efforts, already begun, to make the Commonwealth fit and agile for the years ahead, so that it can apply its global wisdom to the hopes and needs of this and future generations."*

Whilst I wholeheartedly support the values expressed in the Charter and respect the care with which it was designed, this document will be demonstrably weakened if the Commonwealth does not act on Sri Lanka. The country is heading in an *"increasingly authoritarian direction"*, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms Navi Pillay. She expressed alarm at *"the recent surge in incitement of hatred and violence against religious minorities"*, as well as the *"curtailment or denial of personal freedoms and human rights [...] persistent impunity and the failure of the rule of law."*



The impeachment and dismissal of Sri Lanka's Chief Justice, at the beginning of this year, was a breach of the Commonwealth's Latimer House Principles. The Commonwealth Election Observer Mission to Sri Lanka, which was in the country for the recent Northern Provincial Council elections, noted that voters "*exercised their franchise in the context of a compromised electoral environment [...] with the military in the electoral campaign consistently described to the mission as a significant obstacle to a credible electoral process.*" In addition, there has been neither accountability for the allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by both Government and Tamil Tiger (LTTE) forces during the conflict nor any meaningful attempts to address the root cause of the ethnic conflict and war – the discrimination and marginalisation of the Tamil people right from the time of independence in 1948, which the British Government gave to all the people of the island.

It should not be the case that a Government which is content to ride roughshod over Commonwealth values should play host to CHOGM and subsequently Chair the association. Your Majesty's work to sustain and develop the Commonwealth for this and future generations must not be allowed to be challenged by those, particularly President Rajapaksa and his Ministers, who seem to hold the new Charter in contempt.

As a victim and witness to the armed conflict in Sri Lanka, I have shared in the anguish and grief felt by many people inside and outside of the country. That pain continues to this day. Since 2009, the prospects of peace, justice and reconciliation have been consistently undermined by the Rajapaksa Government. It is because of this lack of faith in his administration that I and numerous others look to the international community and organisations, such as the Commonwealth, for assistance. The association has shown real courage and leadership on important matters before and, in order to ensure its future credibility and success, it must be prepared to do so again. There is no better place to start than Sri Lanka.

Yours very respectfully,

Rev. Dr S.J. Emmanuel
President
Global Tamil Forum

Global Tamil Forum (GTF) was established in 2009 by a number of grass-roots Tamil groups following the end of the armed conflict in Sri Lanka. It is the largest Tamil diaspora organisation with members drawn from across five continents. GTF is committed to a non-violent agenda and seeks a lasting peace in Sri Lanka based on justice, reconciliation and a negotiated political settlement.

Rev. Dr Emmanuel was ordained as a Catholic priest in Rome in 1966. He served the Sri Lankan and Asian churches for many years. He was a victim and witness to the armed conflict and war in Sri Lanka. He has worked tirelessly for the Tamil people and for a just and peaceful Sri Lanka.