

# உலகத் தமிழர் பேரவை Global Tamil Forum



**September 2013**

To the Heads of Government of the Commonwealth

## Open Letter

Dear Heads of Government,

I write, on behalf of the Global Tamil Forum (GTF), to humbly ask you to boycott the 2013 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Colombo. This is not a request I make lightly, given my strong support for an association which has shown real leadership on key issues such as the end of apartheid in South Africa. However, the 2013 CHOGM will seriously weaken the Commonwealth's commitment to core principles of human rights and democracy and will implicitly endorse the actions of President Rajapaksa's regime - a Government accused of responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity and the on-going perpetration of egregious human right violations.

Days after the end of the country's brutal armed conflict in May 2009, President Rajapaksa gave unequivocal commitments to the UN Secretary-General to protect the rights of citizens; ensure the economic and political empowerment of the Tamil majority areas; work towards a lasting political settlement; and take measures to address the violations of international humanitarian and human rights law during the war.

However, the recent damning critique of the ground realities in Sri Lanka by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, has exposed the emptiness of President Rajapaksa's promises. Speaking at the end of her visit to the country in August, she expressed her grave concerns regarding the *"curtailment or denial of personal freedoms and human rights [...] persistent impunity and the failure of the rule of law."* Incredibly, a number of human rights defenders, journalists, citizens and relatives of those missing or disappeared, who had the chance to meet with the High Commissioner, were subsequently intimidated by the security forces. *"This type of surveillance and harassment appears to be getting worse in Sri Lanka, which is a country where critical voices are quite often attacked or even permanently silenced"*, said Ms Pillay. Sri Lanka *"is heading in an increasingly authoritarian direction."*

Her statement is yet more evidence of the significant international concern regarding the situation on the island. The UN Human Rights Council has adopted two resolutions on Sri Lanka, since March 2012, which have demanded accountability and reconciliation and raised a number of issues concerning the promotion and protection of human rights. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, International Crisis Group and many others are unanimous in their condemnation of the Rajapaksa regime.

Sri Lanka's domestic 'Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission' failed to address the allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity. It was deemed *"deeply flawed"* and did *"not meet international standards for an effective accountability mechanism"*, according to the UN Secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Sri Lanka. The Tamil majority, former conflict areas in Sri Lanka have been militarised. There has been no inclusive political settlement that addresses the underlying cause of the conflict - the systematic marginalisation of the Tamil people. Muslims are under increasing threat. Their businesses and mosques have been vandalised and their cultural practices insulted. Unarmed Sinhalese protestors, demonstrating against the pollution of a water supply in the town of Weliveriya in August, were killed by members of the military and police. Even powerful figures like the former military commander and 2010 Presidential candidate, Sarath Fonseka, and Sri Lanka's Chief Justice, Shirani Bandaranayake, have been imprisoned or, in the latter case, illegally removed from office for challenging the Rajapaksa regime.



In 2009, the Commonwealth agreed to defer CHOGM in Sri Lanka until 2013, as a response to the grave allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by both sides during the conflict and to act as an incentive to improve the human rights and political situation in the country. However, it is clear that these issues have not been addressed and no progress has been made.

Given the above, Sri Lanka should not have even been allowed the right to hold this year's event, but Commonwealth Heads of Government can still send a powerful message by staying away from Colombo in November. The Canadian Prime Minister and Foreign Minister have stated that they will not attend unless there is *"significant and substantial signs of human rights improvements in Sri Lanka."*

2013 is not only an important year for Sri Lanka, but a vital moment for the future credibility of the Commonwealth. What started in March with the adoption of the Commonwealth Charter – a document supposed to signify the strengthening of the association's values – will end in November with the depressing scenes of a triumphant President Rajapaksa hosting CHOGM and Sri Lanka becoming Chair of the Commonwealth for the next two years. It is astounding that a Government accused of involvement in war crimes and of complicity in continuing human rights abuses will then sit on bodies, such as the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, mandated to deal with serious and persistent violations of the Commonwealth's fundamental values.

This will be a stain on the Commonwealth and will undermine efforts to improve the association's political and diplomatic influence. The principles that the Commonwealth is meant to espouse must be upheld or they mean nothing.

Therefore, I urge all Heads of Government to:

- Make a stand on Sri Lanka and boycott CHOGM 2013.
- Strengthen the Commonwealth by supporting the implementation of the commitments in the new Charter and moving to bar the Government of Sri Lanka from chairing the association for the next two years.
- Support the establishment of an independent, international investigation into the allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity.
- Prevail upon the Government of Sri Lanka, in the strongest possible terms, the need to end the culture of impunity, to restore the rule of law and to comply with its international obligations to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of its people.

Yours sincerely,

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

Cc: His Royal Highness, The Prince of Wales  
Commonwealth Secretary General, HE Mr Kamalesh Sharma

*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.*