

GTF Inaugural Conference - London 2010 - UK calls for constitutional reforms in Sri Lanka

Global Tamil Forum (GTF) Conference was formally inaugurated on Wednesday 24 February 2010, by the Foreign Secretary of State, Rt. Hon. David Miliband MP, joined by Shadow Foreign Secretary, Rt. Hon. William Hague MP and an array of national and international Parliamentarians, civil leaders and academics, at a momentous show of support for the Tamil Diaspora congregation, at The Gladstone Room in the British Parliament.



In a historic display of cross-party, cross-border, cross-ethnic representation, the inauguration was addressed by guest speakers from across the world to welcome the global initiative. 40 delegates representing 14 Tamil Diaspora host countries, member to the Forum, met for the formal inauguration ceremony and general meeting being held over three days in London.

Members from the delegation were also invited to meet with the British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who read a letter sent to Sri Lanka's President Rajapaksa only a few days before calling on the Government of Sri Lanka to investigate electoral malpractices and to investigate misuse of government resources. Prime Minister also stressed the need for constitutional reform in Sri Lanka and assured the delegation of his personal commitment to take the Tamil issue to the international forum such as the European Union. Australian delegate thanked the Prime Minister, on behalf of Australia and the GTF, for his leadership in blocking Sri Lanka from hosting the next Commonwealth Conference and awarding the opportunity to Australia instead.

The event commenced with a minute silence in respect for all who perished during the many years of war in Sri Lanka, followed by Rev. Father S.J. Emmanuel, President of GTF, welcoming Foreign Secretary Rt. Hon. David Miliband MP who received a standing ovation for his efforts during the war, being one of the first foreign delegates to go to Sri Lanka against all advice, to visit the infamous camps to see for himself the conditions Tamils were in.

“We continue to make the case that the President should use his mandate for a real drive for national reconciliation, a real drive to respect the rights of every single Sri Lankan, a real drive to fulfil the commitments, constitutional and other reforms, that would make a difference”, said the Foreign Secretary in his address.

Foreign Secretary Rt. Hon. David Miliband MP was presented with an inauguration plaque by the Forum.

Amongst the other UK dignitaries addressing the conference were Rt. Hon. Joan Ryan MP, Andrew Dismore MP, Virendra Sharma MP – Chariman of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Tamils (APPG-T), Lee Scott MP, Rt. Hon. Sadiq Khan MP – Minister of State for Transport, Andy Love MP, Hon. Susan Kramer MP, Cllr. Julian Bell and former MEP, Robert Evans. John McDonnell MP and Mike Griffiths, former national leader of the Trade Union Congress (TUC), were amongst well-wishers who attended the event.

Ed Davey MP urged "war crimes must be investigated" and also called for an end to "land-grabbers" through the formation of an independent body to end all fraudulent claims to land. Whilst Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Hon. Dawn Butler MP, advocated support for a "separate state".

The conference was well attended by academics, professionals, community leaders, entrepreneurs and media personnel from the UK and overseas. Assistant Secretary of State, His Excellency Robert O'Blake, sent his representative to the event as an observer. His message was read to the audience by Dr Elias Jeyarajah of GTF. Royal Norwegian Government representative also attended the conference. Senator Robert P. Casey Jr from the state of Pennsylvania sent a congratulatory message which was read to the audience by Dr Soma Ilangovan.

An inaugural magazine was released to mark the event in which, against usual protocol, both Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary issued written statements on a foreign affairs matter. The Conservative leader, Rt. Hon. David Cameron MP, also sent a message of support for the days proceedings. Senator Robert P. Casey Jr. from the state of Pennsylvania was amongst the host of well-wishers such as many parliamentarians from the UK and around the world, the ANC, Royal Norwegian Government and the US State Department.

“Until now your voice has been silent. Now you need to speak up. You cannot afford to waste a single hour. You must seize the moment”, Keith Vaz MP

Mr Sisa James Njikelana, African National Congress Member of Parliament stated that they had expected a lot more from India as the regional power. He further encouraged that “the significance of this gathering is the unwavering determination, deep commitment, optimism by all those attending that ultimately normality will prevail in Sri Lanka”.

“We (British) handed the power to the majority without guaranteeing the rights of Tamils in Sri Lanka. The voice of the Tamils has not been heard in Sri Lanka, the subcontinents or the world. It is an opportunity now for you to voice for your rights”, Simon Hughes MP.

“The situation in Sri Lanka has been extremely worrying. There is no respect for human rights. There has to be a proper negotiation to bring a solution to the problem”, Hon. Gareth Thomas MP, International Development Minister.

The conference also marked the inauguration of the Global Tamil Women Forum (GTWF), an internationally coordinated group of activists working towards the empowerment of Tamil women in Sri Lanka and in Diaspora countries.

Rev. Ven. Madampagama Assaji Mahanayake from the Sinhala Buddhist community and a civil society leader Mr Abdul Majeed Mohammed Casim from the Muslim community in Sri Lanka also attended.

“The political situation in Sri Lanka is very critical and disappointing. It is important that we engage in power sharing with other groups in Sri Lanka”, sympathised Rev. Ven. Madampagama Assaji Mahanayake during his speech.

Siobhain McDonagh MP articulated to the global delegates how British Tamils have effectively worked with legislators in the UK to bring awareness to the plight of Tamils back in Sri Lanka.

“Proper war crimes investigation is important to the progress in Sri Lanka. Self-determination for the Tamil people is the only way forward”, Andrew Pelling MP.

David Burrows MP, Shadow Minister for Justice, reiterated calls for an independent inquiry into war crimes in Sri Lanka and spoke of the ongoing threat to press freedom in the country.

Stephen Pound MP remarked, "I can see flags of different countries in front of you here, one day you will sit in front of your flag of freedom".

Shadow Foreign Secretary, Rt. Hon. William Hague MP, delivered an exhilarating closing speech. “We strongly urge President Rajapaksa’s government to resolve the difficult political issues that remain and take immediate steps to address the concerns of the Tamil people and those of other minority groups. Meaningful political reform and reconciliation should be an urgent priority. This reform will only hold legitimacy if the democratic aspirations of all Sri Lankans, regardless of ethnicity, can be fulfilled.” he affirmed.

Tamil Diaspora living around the world united to form the Global Tamil Forum (GTF), in response to the large scale massacre of Tamil civilians and continuing inhumane

treatment of detainees by the Government of Sri Lanka. Diaspora organisations from the five continents are represented in this Forum and this is the first of its kind.

The Forum called for a worldwide economic boycott of Sri Lanka, by avoiding the purchase of Sri Lankan made products, investment and engagement in any economic activity that promotes the Sri Lanka regime against Tamils. It further renewed its pledge to support the internally displaced persons including children and the pursuit to bringing charges against people who had committed war crimes and crimes against humanity.

GTF will evolve as an independent, inclusive, international organisation which adheres to principles of democracy and non-violence and derives its strength from existing grassroots organisations of the Tamil Diaspora. Working in solidarity with the Tamils and other communities in the island of Sri Lanka, this Forum will strive to restore Tamil People's right to self-determination and democratic self rule in their traditional homeland in the island of Sri Lanka.