

UNITED AUSTRALIANS OF SRI LANKAN ORGANISATIONS

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We refer to the Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe's recent interview with *The Australian* (23/2/2015) criticising the Australian Government's policy of allowing Sri Lanka to handle its internal issues without foreign intervention.

In this interview Mr Wickremesinghe has criticised Australia, along with other nations that had backed Sri Lanka's move to establish its own domestic instrumentalities to resolve the human rights issues arising from the last phase of the war (from January 2009 to May 2009) against the LTTE terrorists.

International law recognises the right of nations to establish internal instrumentalities and confirms that external interventions are warranted only when nations are 'unable or unwilling' to deal with human rights issues. Australia's stand has been in line with this principle. Sri Lanka has confirmed its willingness and ability to hold its own investigations and the mechanism is functioning satisfactorily. It is a credit to Australia's foreign policy that it has recognised Sri Lanka's maturity and ability to deal with its own problems throughout its two millennium history.

Without turning a blind eye to the events of the last phase of the three decade old conflict, Australia has publicly stated that Sri Lanka should look into the allegations themselves and that Australia will continue to engage and encourage Sri Lanka to usher in a peaceful society. Australia also has a deep understanding and appreciation of the historical circumstances of the oldest democracy in Asia struggling to maintain its democratic framework, values and institutions threatened by Tamil Tiger terrorism. The final victory on May 19, 2009 was a triumph of democracy over a fascist separatist tyranny that Mr Wickremasinghe had tried to appease, at a great cost to the nation, when he was previously the Prime Minister more than a decade ago.

The crux of the UN Human Rights Council resolution was that 40,000 or more civilians were killed in the last phase of the war, when no scientific or credible study had been undertaken to assess these casualties. In any case, to count the casualties of only the last five months of a 33-year-old war is totally misleading and counter-productive. This speculative methodology is a partisan process aimed at pointing the finger only at Sri Lanka, rather than for promoting reconciliation and peace in the nation.

The unreliability of the figures touted around is evinced by the statistics provided by the former UN representative in Sri Lanka, Gordon Weiss, whose original claim of 7,000 when in Colombo jumped to 40,000 in his book *'The Cage'*. Later when he was questioned in Melbourne, the figure dropped to back 10,000, leaving his credibility in tatters.

On the other hand, the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) has conducted a census on the basis of UN guidelines using a house-to-house survey in the former war zones counting the casualties in each house. This was done by Tamil teachers, public servants and civil society organisations. The figure from that survey was approximately 8000. Many of these were killed in the last stages of the war when Tamils civilians were forcibly held as 'human shields' by the LTTE against advancing Sri Lankan security forces. In the absence of other scientific surveys, it is reasonable to accept the GOSL figures as being closest to the ground realities.

It should also be noted that Australia and India are two leading democracies that backed Sri Lanka's right to resolve its problems with its own domestic instrumentalities. Unfortunately, Mr. Wickremasinghe, who is an unelected Prime Minister without a Parliamentary majority of his own, has criticised a friendly and long-time friend of Sri Lanka without taking into account the historical realities before, during and after May 19, 2009.

Australia's relations with Sri Lanka are linked to its own interests, no doubt. This is inevitable and natural because Australia's interests too were at stake if any part of the Indian Ocean was destabilised. Sri Lanka, located in the hub of the Indian Ocean, is vital for Australia's economy, security and stability. There is no 'mystery' in Australia's relations with GOSL, as stated by Mr. Wickremesinghe. Furthermore, his statement that the former Minister of Immigration of Australia, Mr Scott Morrison's refusal to meet the TNA representatives is a breach of protocol and his assertion that the present Minister of Immigration will not receive a warm welcome in Sri Lanka is unbecoming of a national leader.

Australia is also a big investor in the Sri Lankan economy. We share common traditions in parliamentary democracy, a commonwealth history and sport, most of all being cricket. To ignore all the positive relations and to selectively attack Australian foreign policy based on the partisan political agenda of Mr Wickremesinghe is, to say the least, most unfortunate. No Australian would let down his or her own country in the way Mr. Wickremesinghe has done to promote his brand of domestic politics.

The current Prime Minister of Sri Lanka is holding office under 'a 100 day plan' without being elected in his own right and for him to decry the productive and lasting relationship formulated between Australia and Sri Lankan governments reflects badly on his political maturity. It appears that he has placed domestic politics ahead of international diplomacy, with his main objective being the vilification of the previous government, ignoring completely the national interests of Sri Lanka.

We, as Australians of Sri Lankan origin, reject Mr Wickremasinghe's criticism and thank the Government and people of Australia who have been generous, friendly and understanding of Sri Lanka in troubled times and continue to support the nation's development, peace and prosperity on an ongoing basis.

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