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Grace Williams

Member, Tamil American Peace Initiative

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Lessons of Srebrenica: How the 15th Anniversary of Srebrenica Can Guide Sri Lanka

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On the 15th anniversary of Srebrenica massacre, President Obama has led the way in reminding the world that the lessons of Srebrenica must continue to guide our moral compass. He has reminded us that "the name Srebrenica has since served as a stark reminder of the need for the world to respond resolutely in the face of evil." But more so, he has reminded us that after great atrocities, we still have a great duty to foster peace and reconciliation. No place can the duty to help pursue justice and build peace be greater than in a fractured Sri Lanka struggling to recover from war.

It has been a little over a year since Sri Lanka's 25-year civil war ended following a period of intense fighting. According to Human Rights Watch, over 80,000 people died in the conflict, many thousands of whom were unarmed civilians seeking refuge in safe-zones. The conflict in Sri Lanka has no easy answers. There are no heroes, only deeply entrenched beliefs on all sides. But when UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon appointed an international panel to help investigate war crimes to overcome the past, the Rajapaksa government chose to respond by allowing a member of their government to lead a violent protest against the UN office in Colombo and incite public sentiment against "outsiders."

It should be of great concern how quickly the protest against the UN turned hostile. Such sentiments are easily corrupted and turned toward other purposes. The intolerant tone being set by the Sri Lankan government is poisoning what should be a period of national reconciliation. President Rajapaksa continues to govern through emergency law. He continues to police with the military. He has reinforced the belief that the Tamil population should be feared while living in fear, and should be mistrusted as unredeemable, ethnically-defined terrorists. During his presidency, he has fed Sri Lankan society a steady diet of suspicion for "the other." The Tamil civilian population still has little option but to accept their poor lot with no meaningful

representation; no means of defending their political, economic, or human rights; and no hope for a future that looks any different from the past 60 years.

When Samantha Power, President Obama's director of multilateral affairs and a champion of justice and reconciliation, recently visited Sri Lanka, the Rajapaksa government sold it as an endorsement of their counterterrorism strategy. They hide behind counterterrorism measures to explain away the deaths of as many as 40,000 civilians during the final years of the fighting--never mind that such explanations do not explain the decades of official, systematic oppression of the Tamil people that long preceded the rise of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Now that the LTTE has been wiped out, the Rajapaksa plan seems to be to go back to the way things were before: a Sri Lanka where Tamils have no real space to genuinely participate in the political system and no means to redress this exclusion.

The LTTE, as self-appointed leaders of the Sri Lankan Tamil community, wrote a history that has made it easy for the myth that all Tamils are supporters of terrorism to be propagated. Likewise has it then been easy for the Sri Lankan government to justify the brutal campaign to put the LTTE down once and for all, no matter the cost in civilian blood. There is no moral victory when the consequences to our humanity are so great and so many are left living in fear. A war on terror that does not resolve the landscape from which terror was born can provide only hollow and fleeting victory.

The Tamils have the capacity to rebuild themselves into the peaceful and prosperous community they were for so many centuries before the war began--but not while they remain a community under siege. Traditional lands have begun to be sold off, Tamils were unable to exercise their right to vote for new leadership because hundreds of thousands of Tamils were still in government-run camps during the hastily-organized election, Tamil religious beliefs are being challenged, and traditional sources of livelihood are being contracted out to foreign investors while the right of return remains uncertain. There is no justice for crimes committed against civilians, and there is no justice for those who stand accused without representation.

The challenge of bringing justice to Sri Lanka is significant. But only when all factions of Sri Lanka's civilian population have the chance to confront the atrocities they were party to with their mutual silence can the island begin to define its future.

And in an odd way, there is hope in Srebrenica. Fifteen years ago, the Serbs stood condemned by the world as brutal killers. Today a new generation of Serbs sits over a vibrant young democracy, their redemption championed by the United States. It was no more true that the Serbs were a "people of killers" than it is true of the Tamils, but it was certainly no less difficult for the US to stand up for their rights.

The lessons of Srebrenica are many, but beyond "never again" they point to the complexity -- but great rewards -- of building peace and democracy from ethnic strife. Now is the moment when the history of Sri Lanka could change, but in Sri Lanka there are no voices to speak up for what is right, and no space in which the truth can be spoken. The recent actions of the Sri Lankan government have dispelled any faith that this is the path they will pursue. As the lessons of Srebrenica are remembered and measured, the need to build peace in Sri Lanka, to bring

inclusive democracy to Sri Lanka, to help Sri Lanka find heroes again, and to once again remind neighbors of their mutual humanity should not be overlooked.

Grace Williams is a member of the Tamil American Peace Initiative, a group of Tamil Americans formed to help bring lasting peace, justice, democracy, and good governance to Sri Lanka. She is a specialist in healthcare for women and children with special needs and disabilities.