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**Tamil American Peace Initiative calls for all Sri Lankans to vote for peaceful change to address underlying issues of the war**

The Tamil American Peace Initiative (TAPI), a group of Tamil Americans dedicated to peaceful change in Sri Lanka, said today that the Sri Lankan presidential election on January 26<sup>th</sup> will be instrumental in achieving a lasting peace on the island and addressing the underlying causes of the country's 30-year war. The group called on all voters in Sri Lanka to vote for a new government that will focus on healing the country's deep divisions.

"A new government in Sri Lanka will have the opportunity to begin the process of reconciliation, resettlement, and rebuilding that the Tamil areas of the country so desperately need," said Dr. Karunyan Arulanantham, a spokesman for TAPI. "Stability and peace can only be established if the new leadership takes these measures."

TAPI believes that in order to create a stable Sri Lanka, the new government must embrace Tamils and their culture as an essential part of the country's heritage.

Dr. Arulanantham said that TAPI wanted an independent, international inquiry into the causes and the conduct of the war as a way to "close the book" on 30 devastating years of bloodshed. That way the country can begin to move ahead reestablishing democracy and the rule of law, and starting reconstruction.

To further those goals, it is critical that the Sri Lankan government take immediate steps to resettle displaced Tamils, Dr. Arulanantham said. TAPI demanded that the government release all Tamil detainees and give suspected former rebels general amnesty. It also called for the government to demilitarize the North-East and allow all people free movement to return to their homes. The new government must authorize international monitoring of the Tamil return and permit the Tamil Diaspora – as well as international governmental and non-governmental organizations -- to provide assistance for resettlement of Tamil and Muslim refugees, Dr. Arulanantham said.

Establishing stability in Sri Lanka will depend largely on international and government efforts to rebuild areas destroyed in the war and aid Tamils who return there, TAPI said. The group highlighted the need for economic development and job programs in Tamil areas, saying without them, many returnees will not be able to support their families. TAPI called for the Sri Lankan government and international NGOs and governments to invest in much needed infrastructure projects for electricity, water, agriculture, ports, and roads, in addition to rebuilding houses, hospitals, and schools. The local population must be involved in this effort, which will be a vital capacity building program to help create and train a skilled local labor force. It is a top priority of the Tamil Diaspora to contribute its expertise in this matter.

A Senate Report on Sri Lanka released in December stated that "Sri Lanka stands at a critical juncture in its efforts to secure a lasting peace." TAPI believes that a new leadership that works to reconcile, resettle, and rebuild will help solidify democracy on the island, advance a pluralistic society, and help guarantee a lasting peace.

TAPI echoes the sentiments expressed by Chris Patten, Co-Chair of the International Crisis Group, in a recent Op-Ed article in the New York Times. Mr. Patten said: “Whoever wins, the outside world should use all its tools to convince the government to deal properly with those underlying issues to avoid a resurgence of mass violence. In the interest of lasting peace and stability, donor governments and international institutions — India, Japan, Western donors, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank — should use their assistance to support reforms designed to protect democratic rights, tie aid to proper resettlement of the displaced, and a consultative planning process for the reconstruction of the war-ravaged, overly militarized north. U.N. agencies and nongovernment organizations should have full access to monitor the programs to ensure international money is spent properly and people receiving aid are not denied their fundamental freedoms.”

TAPI cautioned that based on past experience, Tamils may become victims of post election violence, and the group called on the international community to guard against such a prospect.

“The elections are a great opportunity to begin a healing process that will lead to peace and restore justice for all people,” Dr. Arulanantham said. “Everyone should get out and vote on January 26 for a new government that will start the long job of rebuilding the country, ending mistrust among the peoples, and reestablishing democracy and the rule of law.”

#### *About TAPI*

The Tamil American Peace Initiative (TAPI) was formed by group of Tamil Americans to help bring lasting peace, justice, democracy, and economic development to Sri Lanka; to focus attention on the destruction of Tamil communities and culture caused by 30 years of war; and to demand an end to the continuing oppression of Tamils on the island.

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