

# **PRESS RELEASE<sup>#</sup>**

## **CALL FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION ON TRINCOMALEE SITUATION**

A fact-finding team of civil society representatives traveled to Trincomalee on 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of April 2006 in the wake of reports of civil unrest in the District.

The findings of this mission have left us gravely concerned by the events that have unfolded in Trincomalee over the past week; events which have left over 20 civilians dead, over 30 shops and 100 homes destroyed by fire and over 3000 persons displaced and seeking refuge in schools and places of worship.

On 12<sup>th</sup> April, a bomb exploded in the vegetable market in Trincomalee town, leaving five persons, including one child, dead. Within 15 minutes of the explosion, a gang of armed Sinhala persons began a rampage through the business area of the town, setting Tamil shops on fire, and looting goods. According to bystanders, though the gang never consisted of more than 100 at any given time, there was no reasonable attempt made by the security forces to prevent the violence.

Several people have been reported killed in and around the market on the 12<sup>th</sup> during the course of the rioting. Some bodies were thrown into the flames of the burning shops. 19 deaths, including of 7 women, have been reported so far; however the figure is rising daily. The burning of bodies has resulted in delays in identification, and has destroyed traces of mutilation and sexual assault prior to the death.

Over 30 shops were burned in all, the majority belonging to Tamils and 2 to Muslims. It appeared that several large shops were specifically targeted – among them were Hari Electricals, the Dollar Agency, the Dialog Company and the Sunlight (Lever Brothers) Agency. The mob also attacked the Hatton National Bank.

Other incidents of violence, including arson and murder took place outside the town. The body of a young Sinhala man, identified as Nissanka, was found in Mahindapura on the 14<sup>th</sup> April. He had been missing since the 13<sup>th</sup>. Subsequently the Sinhala villagers of Mahindapura went on a rampage in the neighbouring Tamil village Nadesapura and set fire to over 40 homes. The office of the Trincomalee District Youth Development Organization (AHAM) was attacked and several vehicles belonging to the organization were set on fire; the Hindu temple in the village was also attacked. Similar incidents have taken place in Thuwarangkadu, resulting in the displacement of almost 1000 persons, and in Andankulam, where several houses were burnt down. The houses in Andankulam were new, built under a post-tsunami reconstruction scheme.

The violence, as well as the fear and insecurity experienced by the civilians, has led to a fairly substantial displacement. As of the 20<sup>th</sup> April, the District Secretariat, Trincomalee, had this figure at 2673 persons (723 families). This does not take into account the large numbers who are residing with family and friends, and those who are simply leaving their homes at night-time for more secure locations. The response to the displacement, even from NGOs, has been slow, hampered by the prevailing tensions and lack of personnel. In some areas government assistance was received only on the 18<sup>th</sup> April, despite the fact that people were displaced on the 14<sup>th</sup> April.

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**# This press release has been refused to be carried by all local media approached**

The speed with which the violence erupted after the explosion seems to indicate an element of pre-planning that is extremely disturbing. Two observers referred to the situation as being reminiscent of the anti-Tamil riots of July 1983. The rioting lasted for over two hours, during the daytime. During this entire period the armed forces and the Police did almost nothing to prevent the violence from taking place. There are several very credible eye witness accounts to the manner in which the security forces stood by and allowed the burning and killing to take place.

Although there is a multi-ethnic Citizens' Committee led by religious leaders of all communities in Trincomalee town, as well as Peace Committees initiated by the Police at the level of every Grama Sevaka Division, they have been ineffective in the face of the recent incidents of violence. There is a very high degree of mistrust and animosity between the Sinhala and Tamil communities in particular. Groups remain polarized on the basis of ethnicity and there is no structure that has the capacity to bring them together in a positive and constructive manner. Even well-established social activists expressed their fear of taking the initiative to assist those affected by the violence; some of them were already receiving threatening telephone calls.

Given that Trincomalee has always been a flashpoint for ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, it is imperative that civil society organizations in the south concentrate on strengthening existing networks and building new ones, to give a truly plural character to the moderate and peace-loving voices of Trincomalee's peoples and to ensure that a slide back into barbaric ethnic tensions does not arise.

On the basis of its findings, we wish to highlight the following areas of concern and appeal to the government, political parties, non-governmental organizations and all members of civil society:

- ❑ Immediate steps must be taken to ensure that all emergency and humanitarian assistance necessary is extended to those displaced by the violence; rebuilding of houses should be a priority;
- ❑ A delegation of senior members of all leading political parties should undertake a visit to Trincomalee to meet with all sections of the population as a confidence-building measure;
- ❑ The government should devise some means of accepting accountability for the inability of the security forces to prevent the violence; a collective apology from the state and from southern political parties to the people of Trincomalee would go a long way towards re-building bridges of communication and trust;
- ❑ An independent investigation into the violence following the bomb explosion on 12<sup>th</sup> April should be undertaken by a team comprising representatives of government and non-government bodies; the investigation should aim at recording the various testimonies regarding the incidents and at making recommendations to the government regarding justice and redress for the victims;
- ❑ These measures should take into account the culture of impunity that has prevailed in Sri Lanka, taking on board the experiences of previous commissions, and ensure that concrete steps are taken and implemented by the government to end impunity;
- ❑ Civil society organizations should create a 'rapid response' network that will make regular and systematic visits to their partners and colleagues in Trincomalee in order to monitor the situation;
- ❑ Payment of compensation should be transparent, unbiased and acceptable to all affected parties;
- ❑ Institutions such as the District office of the National Human Rights Commission should be reinforced with material and human resources to enable it to act more effectively in a time of crisis such as this;

- The Citizens' Committee should be strengthened so that it can act independently and with the recognition of the authorities;

We note that the LTTE have been engaged in acts of armed attacks against the security forces resulting in further heightening tension and fear within the community and the Trincomalee area.

We appeal to the LTTE to:

- Halt these acts of violence and commit to the pursuit of its objectives through non-violent and democratic means;
- Ensure that there are no obstacles in providing emergency and humanitarian assistance to those displaced by the violence and facilitate in creating a safe environment for the implementation of aid work by agencies and individuals;

It is imperative that all political actors are aware of the dangers involved in not taking control of the situation and ensuring that the potential for heightened violence in Trincomalee is curbed. The creation of an environment in which people can return to their homes and their livelihoods should be given priority. In the current climate of insecurity, attempts by some politically motivated groups to incite ethnic and religious hatred should be dealt with immediately and all citizens need to be more vigilant about these manipulations. The fragility of the peace process at this moment calls for a concerted initiative to safeguard the CFA and strengthen the voices for peace in Sri Lanka.

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