

•Written by - British Tamils Forum -•

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Members of the British Tamil community, including British Tamils Forum members, met the UK Prime Minister David Cameron at 10 Downing Street today to challenge the UK government on its decision to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) that is due to take place in Sri Lanka later this month. The delegation were invited to meet the Prime Minister following sustained calls by many, both within and outside the Tamil community, that the UK Government should follow the Canadian government's lead and boycott CHOGM 2013 if it takes place in Sri Lanka. The Tamils present at the meeting told the Prime Minister that the UK's participation in the summit would send a message that the international community is prepared to turn a blind eye while the Sri Lankan state continues to commit the human rights abuses, war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide against the Tamil people. They also called on the Prime Minister to ensure that – if the meeting does go ahead – the President of Sri Lanka, who is accused of committed serious war crimes, does not become chairperson-in-office of the Commonwealth for the next two years.

In response, the Prime Minister said that he could not boycott the summit without betraying Britain's duties to the Commonwealth and its other member states, and that it is now too late to prevent the Sri Lankan President gaining chairmanship of the Commonwealth. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister assured the delegation that he would not let Sri Lanka use the event as an opportunity to whitewash its international image, and that he would instead ensure his visit is used to shine a spotlight on past and current crimes being committed by Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, the Prime Minister told the delegation that he had seen the documentary No Fire Zone, aired this week on Channel 4, and found it one of the most harrowing films that he had ever seen. He repeatedly assured the delegation he would insist that an international, independent inquiry takes place, looking at both past and present crimes committed against the Tamil people.

The Prime Minister said that, particularly since seeing the film, he is anxious to use his trip to see the war affected areas and people. He would also like to visit the Uthayan (Tamil) newspaper offices in Jaffna, which have been the target of much state violence and intimidation,

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and the Jaffna Library, which was tragically burnt down by Sinhala security forces and mobs in 1981 – an inconsolable loss to the heritage of the Tamil nation. Furthermore, the Prime Minister said that, while there, he would challenge the Sri Lankan government on its plans to water down the already-limited powers granted to the recently elected Northern Provincial Council.

British Tamils Forum is dismayed that the Prime Minister still insists on going to CHOGM, despite the mounting evidence that Sri Lanka does indeed see the meeting as an opportunity to brush its abuse of the Tamil people under the carpet. It is noteworthy that, even as the Prime Minister spoke to the Tamil delegation, Sri Lanka was busy promoting itself at a World Travel exhibition in East London, where its CHOGM host-nation status was an integral part of its marketing campaign.

Nevertheless, given the Prime Minister's evident shock at the events he saw in No Fire Zone, British Tamils Forum still urges him – even at this late stage – to change his mind and boycott the event, or at least to send a reduced delegation in his stead.

If the Prime Minister does go on to attend CHOGM, British Tamils Forum hopes that he will stick to his promise to openly, firmly and persistently call for an international, independent investigation into past and continuing international crimes in Sri Lanka, and to visit and hear with open heart the genuine and long-running grievances of the Tamil people.

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Theguardian.com: David Cameron presses for Sri Lanka war crimes inquiry. PM calls for international oversight if country does not order its own review amid pressure to boycott Commonwealth summit By Rowena Mason and Sam Jones

British Tamils Forum: British Tamils press David Cameron on UK participation in CHOGM

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