

•Written by By Easwaran Rutnam•

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With the outgoing UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay confirming that her office has put together a team to investigate allegations over the war in Sri Lanka, the role of the Tamil Diaspora will be also in the spotlight. Suren Surendiran, the spokesman for the Global Tamil Forum (GTF), an influential Tamil lobby group based in London expressed his views on the investigation.

**Q: Does the GTF has any plans on assisting the OHCHR probe on Sri Lanka by providing information or any form of evidence related to the war?**

A: The process of collecting evidences or the operational terms of reference for the investigation haven't been made public as yet. Just as GTF submitted a whole series of documentary evidences to the UN Panel of Experts on crimes that were committed at the end of the war, GTF will continue to fully support any international independent process that has the potential to gain justice for our people that's long overdue.

GTF as an internationally recognised organisation will represent the Tamil voice in these international forums until justice is served to our people who lost their loved ones. GTF will also help to expose the current ground human rights reality for Tamils, Muslims, Christians and Sinhalese, particularly the effects of militarisation of the north and east of the country is having on the Tamil community.

**Q: What is your opinion on some of the people proposed by OHCHR to be part of the investigation commission?**

A: As far as I know, Ms. Sandra Biedas is the only name that has so far being publicly confirmed by OHCHR. Ms. Biedas has the right qualifications and ground experiences that best suites her to head up the investigation in Sri Lanka. Ms. Biedas has been in the UN system for over many years. She has worked and reported on different types of rights violations, abuses and breaches of international law in different circumstances in Nepal, Haiti, Congo and Sudan.

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In Sudan Ms. Biedas' report accused the army of torture, rapes, killings and abductions.

The only other name I saw being mentioned yet not confirmed is Judge Dame Silvia Cartwright who was the trial judge for the Cambodian War Crimes tribunal. The fact that she has been considered implies to me that evidences that exist regarding the alleged violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in Sri Lanka could mount to serious ones.

**Q: The Government has refused to assist the investigation. In your opinion will this have serious repercussions on Sri Lanka?**

A: I don't want to speculate on any serious repercussions but shall leave that for the international institutions like the UN and other governments to decide. However, as GTF, we think by co-operating with the investigation the government can do a great favour to the country and its entire people.

President Rajapaksa has always maintained that his government, military or him as the Commander in Chief have nothing to hide. By allowing and supporting the investigation he can put a full stop, once and for all to the allegations of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity.

By doing so he will also help the burden that each and every Sri Lankan, be it Sinhalese, Tamil, Christian, Buddhist or Muslim carry being tarnished by these allegations. President and others in the Government have gone on the record on various international media claiming that there was zero casualty to more recently admitting that there were casualties but not to the extent claimed by the UN Panel of Experts' Report or the UN – Petrie Report or the numbers claimed by Bishop of Mannar at the LRRC hearing.

President, the Minister for Disaster Recovery and the Presidential Envoy to the UNHRC until recently, Mahinda Samarasinghe and the then Military Spokesperson Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara have all gone on the record on TV interviews, claiming that there were only five to a maximum of ten thousand civilians who were caught up in the so called 'no fire zone' but ended up receiving over 293,000 civilians, at the end of the war.

This investigation will establish why, what or whether this under estimation had any international law implications and whether this was deliberate. Evidences that have surfaced at various

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points including through several Channel 4 documentaries of breaches of international law, were shared by the Red Cross. Supporting this investigation will help disprove all these allegations once and for all.

The government must have learnr 5 years after end of the war, that hiding away from answering to these allegations or flatly denying them or claiming that there are major infrastructure developments in the North and East for people to forget the past and move on will not make these allegations go away. So GTF calls upon President Rajapaksa and his government is to assist this investigation and co-operate with it as Ms. Navi Pillai has requested in her opening speech at the UNHRC on 10 June 2014.

**Q: Will an investigation conducted from outside Sri Lanka be credible enough?**

A: As GTF has consistently and tirelessly called for, only an international independent investigation will be credible and acceptable for the victims. We are after all talking about an UN investigation, which is the ultimate international authority signed up and accepted by all recognised countries, including Sri Lanka.

We are also talking about established and experienced professionals who are internationally renowned for their expertise, neutrality and objectiveness. If this is not credible, what is?

**Q: What is your view on the new High Commissioner for Human Rights?**

A: GTF's view is very positive. GTF is encouraged that the Prince has an established track record for no nonsense attitude. His credentials are very relevant and impeccable. Prince Zeid Ra'ad Zeid al-Hussein is a strong advocate for international justice having had extensive involvement in the creation of the International Criminal Court (ICC). In September 2002, Prince Zeid was elected the first President of the governing body of the ICC and, in three years, oversaw the Court's growth into the institution it has now become.

**Q: There are fears over the witnesses who will give evidence to the OHCHR commission from Sri Lanka. What measures do you feel needs to be taken to ensure their protection?**

A: Sri Lanka has become a lawless land, unfortunately. Police, the Judiciary, all of the commissions that one would expect to be independent in a thriving democracy have all or most being politicised and corrupted.

## **GTF ready to assist OHCHR probe By Easwaran Rutnam**

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With a track record of being in the worst top ten countries for disappearances, being recorded as one of the most dangerous countries for independent journalists, it is obviously a very dangerous and life threatening proposition to have witnesses coming forward to give evidence without due witness protection mechanisms and laws in place.

Remember this is Sri Lanka, where after the Commissioner for UNHRC Ms. Navi Pillai met a few victims and witnesses in August 2013, these people were allegedly visited, questioned, and intimidated allegedly by military intelligence persons as claimed by her office, in a statement following her visit. A similar fate was experienced by the few who met Prime Minister David Cameron when he visited the north in November 2013

Courtesy: <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2014/06/15/gtf-ready-to-assist-ohchr-probe/>