



Tamil demands remain unchanged

(Washington DC; November 27, 2018) - Today is Maaveerar Naal - the Tamil National Remembrance Day. It marks the 36th anniversary of the death of Lt Shankar, the first member of the LTTE to die in the war against the Sri Lankan state. As every year, Eelam Tamils in the homeland and in the diaspora come together on this day to remember those who died in the armed resistance against Sinhala Buddhist supremacy. Their sacrifice is mourned and their commitment to liberation is remembered and honoured.

In the years following the end of the armed conflict in 2009, Tamils in the diaspora galvanised on Maaveerar Naal, thronging events in the tens of thousands. Tamils in the homeland meanwhile held clandestine commemorations, lighting a candle in remembrance or going to visit their house of worship. Former President Mahinda Rajapaksa's unrelenting grip on the Tamil population made public remembrance of Maaveerar Naal nearly impossible. At the same time, the Sinhala state machinery demolished LTTE cemeteries which held the graves of thousands of Tamil fighters, and suppressed not only expression of support for LTTE but also demands for accountability and the challenging of impunity for the genocide that occurred.

The "unity government" in 2015 lessened the pressure it exerted on the Tamil population, which allowed for larger and larger commemorations of this day. Last year, thousands thronged to LTTE cemeteries in the Tamil homeland, defying surveillance and intimidation to remember the fallen and their struggle for liberation. However, next to no progress was made towards building a sustainable peace - one that tackles Sinhala Buddhist supremacy, acknowledges the Tamil nation's right to political expression and one that holds those guilty of mass atrocities accountable. While western powers were prematurely congratulating Sri Lanka for "progress" towards "reconciliation", Sinhala Buddhist supremacy continued to fester and grow, both within the state structures and amongst the masses, culminating in mass violence against Muslims earlier this year.

The return of Mahinda Rajapaksa was predictable. It is no secret that without addressing the root cause of oppression - the toxic nature of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and the state's role in perpetuating it - any so-called progress can be overturned at the whim of the electoral majority. Even if Rajapaksa is somehow side-lined and control is regained by another party, for as long as the insidious racism rampant in the south finds recourse within the state structures, incremental progress will remain vastly inadequate. Those who will suffer from the repercussions will be the Tamil-speaking people on the island.

In his last public Maaveerar Naal address ten years ago, LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran stated that the intent of the Sinhala state was to "subjugate the Tamil nation under Sinhala [...] military despotism" and that the Sinhala nation has seen no political transformation in the past 60 years. Ten years on, the Sri Lankan state is no closer to the necessary political transformation. The focus of the international community must be this political transformation - one that protects the political rights of the Tamil people and brings about an end to both impunity and Sinhala Buddhist ethnocracy. Without that, Sri Lanka's nigh unbroken history of conflict and instability is doomed to continue.

As such, on Maaveerar Naal Tamils do not only remember the thousands of lives sacrificed in the struggle for liberation, they also reaffirm their demands for a fundamental transformation of the Sri Lankan state that ensures their rights and dignity, and a future free from Sinhala Buddhist ethnocracy and its entrenched impunity. Anything less would be a betrayal of the sacrifices honoured on this day.