

Statement by Father Elil Rajendram

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Since the end of war in 2009 the government of Sri Lanka has celebrated May 18th as the 'victory day' to remember the Sri Lankan soldiers who died in the war. This year the victory parade was moved from the capital to a southern town, but the parade was still organised as a 'War Heroes Remembrance Day', which excludes the civilians killed in the course of the conflict. The civilians are mostly Tamils, who faced a grotesque massacre towards the end of the war at Mullivaikal in May 2009, where they were trapped and killed by the thousands. At least two commemorations that I know of in the North planned for Mullivaikal were banned and people were threatened not to attend the event I organised.

The recent appointment of Major General Jagath Dias to the post of Chief of Staff of the Sri Lankan Army is a blow to justice. There is considerable evidence pointing to violations of international human rights and humanitarian law during the final stages of the war in 2008-2009, in which Major General Dias is accused of playing a major role. His promotion comes as a blow just as the new government is talking of establishing a domestic accountability mechanism to investigate the crimes committed during the war.

The Government's partiality towards the armed forces was made further clearer by President Srisena's order granting the title of Field Marshal to General Sarath Fonseka. In bestowing this title, the President asserted recognition for "outstanding gallantry, meritorious performance and distinguished service to the nation during the humanitarian operation and the defeat of terrorism in Sri Lanka in May 2009." The characterization of the last phase of war as a humanitarian operation does not bode well with the President's promise of a credible inquiry.

When the GoSL was granted a deferral of the report of the OHCHR investigation into Sri Lanka, it promised to set up a credible domestic mechanism to investigate the truth and carry out justice. But so far there has been no proposal to discuss in the public domain. The UN has asked the government to consult the victims in designing the mechanism, but to date that has not happened.

President Sirisena in his speech on 'War Heroes Remembrance Day' promised that the country will take forward development and reconciliation together with investigating the truth. But militarisation of Tamil areas remains unchanged after the change of regime.

In addition there is no political will regarding a political solution for Tamils. Mr. Srisena in his May 18th speech called on everyone to defend the unitary status of Sri Lanka, which is constructed around the notion of a Sinhala-Buddhist Nation state. Unless the unitary character is abandoned, Tamils will not feel secure in the island. This requires an internationally mediated process towards finding a sustainable and just political solution.

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