

Following key military victories, the Government of Sri Lanka regained control of the Jafna Peninsula and the Vanni region in northern Sri Lanka which resulted in a massive displacement of population, currently estimated at 800,000. Despite efforts by the Government to assist displaced persons in northern Sri Lanka, many face very harsh living conditions. Security requirements have a negative impact on human rights. Many observers have noted a deterioration of human rights (arbitrary detention, harassment, and rape). The Government's very widespread use of exceptional measures (emergency regulations, Terrorism Prevention Act) remains a major source of concern for human rights activists. During its offensive the Government did, however, seek to avoid or minimize civilian casualties. Under present conditions in Sri Lanka, the Government's greatest challenge is to find a peaceful solution to an interminable conflict.

While recognizing that the Government has much to do to provide better protection of civil liberties, the LTTE's performance on human rights remains unacceptable. The LTTE has continued its guerilla warfare against the Government, using children as young as 13 as soldiers. Because of attacks on isolated villages, blind terrorist actions against civilian populations in Colombo and elsewhere, and extortion and kidnapping, the LTTE continues to be a major source of concern regarding human rights abuses.

CANADIAN POSITION

Canada has been a leader in promoting human rights in Sri Lanka since the mid-1980s. We have worked constructively with the various organizations dedicated to defending human rights in Sri Lanka and have raised the issue in various United Nations fora. Canada has suspended bilateral assistance, channelling funds through NGOs to underline our position. The Government of Canada uses every opportunity to remind authorities in Sri Lanka of our human rights policy. Minister Axworthy raised this issue when the Minister of Justice of Sri Lanka visited Canada in November 1996. Human rights was again raised in recent discussions between our High Commissioner in Colombo and members of the Government of Sri Lanka.

Canada remains concerned about the continuing ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and its negative impact on human rights. We note the Government of Sri Lanka's efforts to establish mechanisms to protect human rights. At the same time, we urge the Government to take action to ensure that these mechanisms function adequately and independently. It is essential for all parties to the conflict to respect human rights throughout Sri Lanka.

Canada is convinced that continued vigilance is necessary to ensure that human rights remains a priority for the Sri Lankan government. We urge the Sri Lankan government to pursue every efforts to achieve a peaceful solution to the conflict, a solution that considers the needs of all Sri Lankans. Pressure must continue to be exerted on the LTTE, so that it ceases its terrorist activities and negotiates in good faith.