

SRI LANKA

ISSUE

In 1997, ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka intensified, with adverse effects on the lives of thousands. The Human rights situation, especially as it effects on displaced persons, continued to be of concern to Canada.

BACKGROUND

The election of a new Government in 1994 seemed to offer the possibility for a peaceful solution to the ethnic conflict that has ravaged Sri Lanka for more than a decade. It also raised hopes that there would be a tangible improvement in human rights. Although some efforts have been made, much remains to be done.

When it came to power, the current Government established several mechanisms, including three Presidential Commissions, to investigate human rights violations. The reports of these Commissions were tabled in September 1997. How Sri Lankan authorities will respond remains to be seen. In March 1997, several months after the Human Rights Commission was officially created, its members were finally named by the President. No women were included among the five Commissioners. Seen nonetheless as a step in the right direction, the Commission must demonstrate its effectiveness throughout the country. This is one important step to show that protection of human rights is a government priority. The Commission must prove that it was created as more than merely a token gesture. Ratification of the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights represents a positive commitment to human rights.

The Sri Lankan authorities have indicated their willingness to work with international human rights mechanisms in the past. They agreed to have an Amnesty International mission visit Sri Lanka in August 1997. While this gesture was commendable, it will be important to see what action is taken in response to the mission's report. The report, published in November 1997, raises a number of questions concerning disappearances and contains recommendations to improve the situation. It is the Sri Lankan Government's responsibility to do everything it can to respond to the many questions raised by the issue of disappearances. The Government must also continue to cooperate with the UN human rights agencies in order to demonstrate its good faith.

The various military operations have resulted in there being many groups of displaced persons. In this regard, Canada is aware of the difficulties facing the Sri Lankan Government in providing essential services. However, the Government remains responsible for the welfare of its people. It is therefore the duty of the authorities to facilitate the work of international organizations providing aid to displaced persons and to see that they are not unduly encumbered by red tape.

It is important to look at the situation of women in the conflict zones, as during 1997 many observers noted a major deterioration in their treatment (harassment, rape, poor health